Campione! Volume 9

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These are novel illustrations that were included in "Campione! Volume 9".

女神再び

カンピオーネ! Campione! IX

丈月 城

Illustration シコルスキー

女神は神殺しとの戦を望む

ついに訪れた女神との再戦の時。
手の内を知られた護堂に
勝機はあるのか!?
新神話第9弾は激闘の調べ!!

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カンピオーネ! IX 女神再び

丈月 城

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草薙護堂は神殺しである。

草薙護堂の前に、再び現れたまつろわぬ女神アテナ。何でもひとつ言うことをきくという、護堂が以前助けられた際にした約束を盾に再戦を望むアテナは、争いを望まない護堂の拒否を認めず、祐理やリリアナを石化し、人質にするという強行的な手段で、護堂との戦いを開始する。アテナが勝負を急ぐのには差し迫られた理由があり…!?

3月の新刊・大好評発売中!!

カンピオーネ! IX 女神再び
丈月 城 イラスト／シコルスキー

ドラゴンクライシス! 13 二人のエンゲージ
城崎火也 イラスト／亜方逸樹

あねもね☆ろわいやる 3
本田 透 イラスト／相音うしお

百合×薔薇 彼女の為の剣と、彼の為の乙女の園 NEW!
伊藤ヒロ イラスト／高見明男

それがどうしたっ ③人間が見つける、両手いっぱいの幸せ
赤井紅介 イラスト／得能正太郎

ドラゴンクライシス! 13 二人のエンゲージ／城崎火也／イラスト・亜方逸樹

Characters Introduction
主要登場人物

草薙護堂（くさなぎごどう）

高校1年生。

軍神ウルスラグナの権能を有するカンピオーネ。

エリカ・ブランデッリ

《赤銅黒十字》の魔術師。

自称、護堂の「愛人」。

万里谷祐理（まりやゆうり）

霊視の力を持つ媛巫女。

護堂の「正妻」と称される。

リリアナ・クラニチャール

《青銅黒十字》の魔術師。

護堂の「騎士」を自任する。

清秋院恵那（せいしゅういんえな）

当代随一とされる「太刀の媛巫女」。

護堂の「剣」として侍る。

アテナ

まつろわぬ女神。

グィネヴィア

神祖の女王。

陸鷹化（りくようか）

護堂の義姉・羅濠の直弟子。

沙耶宮馨（さやのみやかおる）

正史編纂委員会東京分室室長。

甘粕冬馬（あまかすとうま）

正史編纂委員会のエージェント。

装丁／川谷康久（川谷デザイン）

D た9-9

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丈月 城

今さら韓流ドラマにはまりました。
くせになる面白さでヤバイです。
生き別れの兄弟・姉妹ネタは
やっぱり王道で鉄板だと再確認しました。

シコルスキー

神奈川県在住のイラストレーター。
ライトノベルの挿絵を中心に活動させてもらってます。
好きなアニメ・ゲーム系の絵描きさんは堀口悠紀子、
川元利浩、甘露樹、武内崇（敬称略）です。

スーパーダッシュ文庫 丈月 城の本

カンピオーネ！ 神はまつろわず
カンピオーネ！ Ⅱ 魔王来臨
カンピオーネ！ Ⅲ はじまりの物語
カンピオーネ！ Ⅳ 英雄と王
カンピオーネ！ Ⅴ 剣の巫女
カンピオーネ！ Ⅵ 神山飛鳳
カンピオーネ！ Ⅶ 斉天大聖
カンピオーネ！ Ⅷ 受難の魔王たち
カンピオーネ！ Ⅸ 女神再び

丈月 城

Illustration

シコルスキー

女神再び

ホンドオーネ！

Campione Ⅸ

護堂

アテナ

ランスロット

グィヴィネア

恵那

「これは矢に見えて矢に非ず。
冥界の女王が放つ、死への誘い。
すなわち、
死そのものである」

蛇だけがアテナの化身ではない。
あれはフクロウの翼だ。
夜空を自在に
飛びまわる聖鳥。
智慧の象徴。
そして、冥府より来る死の使い。
女神アテナが好む猛禽としての姿！

「アテナよ、
我が槍を受け給え！

護堂の前に
一糸まとわぬ恵那の裸体が横たわっていた。
生まれたままの姿。
つくべき部分にはたっぷりと肉がつき、
ふくよかなくせに、
それ以外はほっそりと引き締まった、
奇跡のような肢体。

「王様ー……。お……起きなさいだ」

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丈月 城

Illustration

シコルスキー

女神再び

カンピオーネ！

Campione IX

あとがき

……(´：ω：`)ブワッ

おつかれさま！＆ありがとうございました♪

しこるすきー

Chapter 1 - Wound of the Divine Lance

Part 1

The region of Brittany in France had a long history with England.

The original inhabitants of Britain, the Celts, had lost their homeland to the Anglo-Saxon invasion. Around the fifth century, part of the Celts living in Cornwall crossed the channel to settle in the westernmost peninsula of France.

People on the continent called them "Britons" which is where the name of the Brittany peninsula originated.

Furthermore, the most legitimate of divine ancestors also had her stronghold secluded here.

The Witch Queen Guinevere.

Her appearance was like a classic western doll with exquisite facial features of a beautiful ten-odd-year-old girl. Clad around her slender body was a black dress reminiscent of funeral attire.

The current location was deep within a forest, protected by a magical barrier.

Somewhere in there was a little lake, with lush woodland along the water's edge, adding a sense of greenery.

Guinevere stood proudly on the lake shore, her sky-blue eyes of sapphire gazing at the surface of the lake.

"Sir Knight... Guinevere believes without a doubt."

The figure of a knight in white armor could be seen on the surface, but he was not underwater.

This was simply a two dimensional existence projected as an image onto the lake surface which acted as a screen.

"Sure enough, our lord the 'King of the End' lies dormant in Japan — the far east. This is the only remaining possibility."

(—Oh? And the basis for that is?)

The knight on the water surface replied using a "voice" that ordinary humans could not hear.

His name was Lancelot du Lac. Also known as the Knight of the Lake.

As the guardian of witches at the pinnacles of heaven and earth, he was the war god protecting the divine ancestors.

"Intel left behind by my kin Asherah. That country once rounded up the ancient tribe and concealed them. With the hero god Susanoo as their leader, the special ability users who moved with him to the Netherworld have been suppressing [Heretic Steel]."

Guinevere explained in detail.

"Even the Great Sage Equaling Heaven was put to use through the Great Wizardry of the Dragon and Snake's Seal... I had become suspicious ever since I learned of its existence. Unless something important was being concealed, there was no need to undertake such a monumental operation."

(Come to think of it, that was the place you visited earlier.)

Lancelot's "voice" replied softly.

He was not a typical [Heretic God]. As an underling whose mission was guarding the Witch Queen, he was just a [God's Shadow] maintained on earth.

"Yes. Due to the possibility of the sealed Great Sage Equaling Heaven being the 'King of the End' — in order to ascertain if he was truly the master we anticipate, I attempted some stratagems."

(However, that monkey king turns out to be a divinity quite different from our master.)

"Yes, it is regrettable that we know even less than those ancient fellows in this regard. Which is why Guinevere stayed a while on that island to investigate, based on clues the deceased Asherah obtained from the Kuhoudzuka family."

The Kuhoudzuka was one of the Four Families leading the Japanese wizardry world, inheriting and adhering to ancient precepts. They were assigned to various direct-controlled shrines

and monasteries in Japan, taking on important duties like at the Saitenguu in Nikkou.[1]

"However, I discovered that out of all the shrines, there was one where they were responsible for some unknown mission, so I decided to pay a visit."

(Hmm, if it is unknown then one can conclude it is "something deliberately concealed," right?)

"Precisely. Guinevere was lucky enough to succeed in spirit vision, and that shrine turns out to be where the secrets of our dormant master lay. If we can unravel this mystery, then the King who manifests at the end of eras will descend once more...!"

Guinevere spoke as if in a trance.

It must have been a good many decades since she was last reborn? All this time, she had been seeking the legendary hero king.

"I wonder if the key to the mystery lies in the lost memories of Guinevere the goddess... However, divine ancestors lose their previous life's memories after being reborn. Even Sir Knight who once served master does not know his location — correction, does not wish to know."

Hence, the key to unraveling the mystery was lost.

As Guinevere sighed, the white knight suddenly interrupted.

(Hoho, this Knight's only wish is to gallop across the fields, brandishing the lance, treasuring the ladies, and protect this way of life. Everything else is trivial and none of my concern. These are the reasons why this Knight has become slow and cowardly.)

Without a shred of hesitation or doubt.

Galloping like the wind, swinging the sword like thunder. These were the traits of the war god Lancelot.

(If the comrade-in-arms is slain on the battlefield, why not just mourn his death with the raising of swords and the singing of dirges, is that not enough?)

A soldier through and through, only living on the battlefield.

With this as his personal philosophy, the war god commented with indifference.

(My apologies. If this Knight was not someone like this, the mystery would have been cleared up sooner.)

"No, Sir Knight is the most important one apart from the strongest of [Steel]. Do not be concerned. Rather than this, please direct your attention to greater things."

Guinevere gazed sincerely at the divine knight reflected on the surface of the water.

She put her arms together and pleaded in earnest, begging:

"I entrust you with everything, Sir Knight. Not as my shadow but as my guardian deity, [Heretic Lancelot], I beseech you to manifest."

(—You realize this is a path of no return?)

"Now that the place where master sleeps has essentially been identified, it would be wrong not to take a gamble. I cannot repeat the mistake of losing to Alexandre Gascoigne six years ago."

Guinevere's previous stronghold was not located in this forest.

The Fairy Realm — was the forest of fairies that connected to the place known as the Netherworld to humans or the Boundary of Life and Immortality as called by gods.

The adventurous story of the Black Prince who discovered and successfully invaded that holy sanctum —

Stood as a painful memory of defeat to Guinevere.

"Due to falling into the Black Prince's trap, the energy of the land we stored in the Magic Holy Grail... We lost the majority of it. The life force of the great earth mother goddess that we spent all our efforts gathering to offer to our master!"

Guinevere once offered to hand over the Magic Holy Grail to Alec.

However, she actually had no intention of following through. As the true legitimate successor to the Holy Grail, she could

simply summon it back any time by thought even if she temporarily gave it away.

It was rather contemptible for Alec to see through that and attempt to take it by force.

"If Sir Knight had been able to use your full power at that time, then the Black Prince would have met his just deserts, and we would have been able to protect the Grail properly."

(The spell that sustains this Knight as your guardian... If that were to be lifted...)

It was unprecedented for gods to descend to the earth for the sake of protecting a particular person.

What made this possible was thanks to the spell cast on Lancelot by a certain goddess. This was Guinevere's previous incarnation — the great mother earth goddess who assisted the King of the End in ancient times and created the Holy Grail together.

However, there was an arbitrary restraint. Lancelot could only manifest for short periods of time when the Divine Ancestor was in crisis.

(If this Knight were to become a [Heretic God], acting freely and going berserk, even forgetting the original mission of protection in the frenzy of battle is very likely... Do you really wish to take such a risk?)

"Yes, that island country's Kusanagi Godou-sama is a person so outstanding that even Her Eminence Luo Hao holds him in high regard. He has even roped in the great John Pluto Smith from across the Pacific Ocean. If we were to start an incident, there will definitely be interference from them. It is unavoidable."

Six years ago, Guinevere had failed to understand the true nature of Campiones.

Now she knew. Devil King Campiones were like glowing embers that erupted into flame at the slightest touch. Even if operations were undertaken in secret, Campiones would still be able to see through them.

Devil Kings were like lights that attracted moths in the way they discerned their mortal enemies the gods.

Completely outrageous. They were the illegitimate children of the fool, killing and challenging gods that transcended humans.

One could only prepare against them by considering the possibility of the improbable happening.

(In that case, girl, polish the divine blade left behind by the master, and make it this Knight's divine artifact!)

"Sir Knight... That... To wake the Divine Sword of Salvation requires obtaining steel that tears apart heaven and earth, causing the stars to crash. You really want that?"

Guinevere suddenly raised her head in response to Lancelot's suggestion.

(—Yes. Despite the lack of divine powers of prescience, this Knight can clearly smell the battle approaching in the near future. For that, this Knight requires a new weapon. Something like that is the bare minimum!)

The helmet's visor obscured the white knight's face, but Guinevere did not need to see it.

She was certain the war god Lancelot must be smiling, greatly delighted with the premonition of battle.

"Yes... Yes! Guinevere will joyfully polish the sword for Sir Knight! Spirits of the earth who accepted my blessing! Offer up the Witch Queen's treasure!"

As Guinevere waved her hand at the ground, the surface was split open.

Two items broke through the earth to appear.

One was a massive urn made of gold, standing at the height of a child's. The other was a very long double-edged sword, but extremely worn and corroded, full of rust.

Though the two items came from the earth, neither of them were soiled by dirt.

The large urn was the divine artifact known as the [Magic Holy Grail].

The other was the steel of the King of the End's sword. These can be thought of as his relics and avatars. Ever since the hero disappeared from the surface of the earth, his beloved sword also lost its luster and was left behind in the ground in its decrepit state .

Part 2

Half a month had passed —

On the plains of Thrace extending from southwestern Bulgaria.

The suburbs of some city was visible from this place, a land full of beautiful plains. Beneath the majestic Balkan mountain range, this open country stretched far and wide, covered by plains and farmland.

Guinevere was using flight magic to descend upon this land. In the middle of this vast plain, a hole had been dug in order to bury the master's decrepit sword.

"O Steel of the King, I beseech you to awaken from this long slumber!"

Guinevere chanted a song of spell words to carry out the current task.

The sword was buried in the earth... All this was done to wake up the steel known as Excalibur in King Arthur's legends.

"More dazzling than gold, more pristine than silver, that is what you are. Born from the ashes of the dragon's skeleton is the dragon-slaying steel. That is what you are!"

A long broad sword that once shone with brilliant white luster.

Its length approaching 100cm, this double-edged blade was actually quite thick, with a structure similar to a woodcutter's chopper. However, it was now worn out and corroded without any luster, only covered by rust.

This divine sword and the earth shared deep roots, and was thus buried in the depths of the land. Now, the essence of the earth was being channeled into the blade for the sake of restoring its lost power.

"The stars, the sun and the moon shall lose their brightness before you! All treasures shall lose their value before you! So please, I beseech you to awaken! Please let the girl who is your maidservant see the light once more!"

There was a reason for selecting this location to revive the divine blade.

The awakened steel was going to be wielded by Heretic Lancelot. Hence, choosing to awaken the sword on land with deep ties to him facilitated the forging of bonds between souls.

"Divine Sword of Salvation, steel amongst steel, the Witch Queen beseeches your divine self to revive!"

Finishing her chant, Guinevere raised her hand.

Lightning descended upon where the ancient sword was buried . In the next instant, a short platinum-colored blade was suddenly thrust out.

The length of the cutting edge was about 50cm or so. This shrunken size was the reborn form of the decrepit divine sword.

Guinevere breathed out in relief.

"Please come and have a look, Sir Knight. Guinevere has finally succeeded!"

"Succeeded... A word thou shouldst not use lightly. At the same time, yonder sharp blade is not something one can ignore, having witnessed that thing!"

The one who responded was an unexpected intruder.

Guinevere's face was full of shock as soon as she noticed the owner of the voice.

"Your divine self has graced this land with your presence... Pray allow Guinevere to offer her salutations."

Clutching the hem of her black dress like a noblewoman's curtsy, she bowed her head.

Trying to suppress her panic as she greeted elegantly, Guinevere appeared composed but was being eroded by anxiety from within. She never expected this goddess to return here!

Despite her appearance of a young girl, the goddess' slender body fully carried the solemn presence of a matriarch deity. As the great mother of the earth, the queen of darkness, and the sky goddess of wisdom, she was the tripartite goddess.

Her name was Athena.

The goddess from Greek mythology who had manifested as a [Heretic God] a while ago.

The divinity of the ancient earth mother goddess had been retrieved together with the mystic treasure, the Gorgoneion. Apparently, she had battled Kusanagi Godou in Japan a few months earlier...

"For the past few days, one sensed an unusual spiritual presence overflowing in this old land of Thrace."

Athena spoke softly like the whistling of the wind.

With silver hair as if the moon had melted into it, she was in the form of an adorable ten-odd-year-old beauty, wearing modest garments in the style of ancient Greece.

Facing such a girl, it would take a fool to mistake her for a harmless child.

Pulsating with power that could not be concealed, one would naturally realize she was no ordinary person even if it was unclear whether she was a god or not.

"One expressly came, suspicious of a premonition of calamity... One never expected that man's maidservant to be polishing the steel of taboo!"

The flames of wrath flickered in the child-like eyes of the goddess.

"Knowest thy shame, kin of the past. Ever since the forgone age of the myths, the descendants of we matriarchs have been irreconcilable enemies with steel that slays dragons and snakes. In spite of that, dost thou wish to sully thy hands with the filth of yonder blade. O far thou hast fallen!"

"Pray heed my words, Goddess Athena, your divine self is severely mistaken. Ever since the forgone age of the myths, we daughters of the earth have always been bound to the fate of serving the heroes of [Steel]. Though there are times when dragons and snakes turned their fangs against them, those occasions only lasted as ephemeral dreams."

Compared to a real goddess, the Witch Queen was just an insignificant existence.

However, Guinevere held her head high and pleaded to Athena .

"We are the 'Hero's Attendants' who serve brave warriors. Even the legends designated the goddess Athena as the beloved daughter of Zeus, the chief deity of Greek mythology. If your divine self truly believes this to be erroneous please do point out corrections."

"—O what sharp tongue thou hast."

Athena narrowed her eyes and stared down at Guinevere unceremoniously.

"The maidservants of that man were all paragons of loyalty. No matter what age we speak of, they are still worthy of respect!"

The divine ancestor's objections seemed to have gradually calmed the goddess' anger.

Athena was also a goddess of war in Greek mythology. Did she not have a personality that viewed with favor those who risked their lives in battle?

Guinevere bowed her head and answered with reverence.

With a lofty stance, the goddess nodded at her childish posture.

"Very well, witch. One shall not pursue this matter for now. However, as mentioned just now, the blinding brilliance one witnessed... What is that steel?"

Athena cast her gaze upon the white blade thrust out of the ground.

"As the goddess of wisdom, one recognizeth that steel. That man's avatar the 'Divine Sword of Salvation,' the blade born from his remains, is it not?"

Amazing — Guinevere was thoroughly impressed with Athena's eyes of wisdom.

To discern the divine blade's origins from a single glance.

"Infused with new life... Though one doth not believe it can be used very long, it will serve its purpose well enough. However, this relic must be ye sole remaining trump card... If ye shall use it without reservation..."

Guinevere saw Athena's eyes turn into those of a snake's.

"Discovered eh?"

Athena glared with evil eyes, as befitted her identity as the goddess of snakes —

Guinevere's body remained completely motionless. With the fate of life and death held firmly in the grasp of the supreme goddess, her body was petrified with fear.

"Thou hast discovered that man? Found the tomb of the sleeping king of salvation who manifesteth whenever the end draws near for the earth? Where? Where doth that fellow lie dormant?"

"East... The far east, Japan..."

Guinevere whispered softly as she panted for air.

The goddess finally displayed true solemnity.

Sure enough, it was still impossible to resist. Guinevere felt absolute terror from her innermost depths, and could only pray with all her heart.

Come save me, Sir Knight! Lancelot du Lac!

"Yonder island? One visited that place recently but did not sense that fellow's presence at all... Perchance it was very skillfully concealed?"

The snake-eyed Athena's murmurs were heard.

Alas, it was a voice like the freezing wind. Simply hearing it was enough to make the body tremble and lose all strength.

"Thou knowest, maidservant?"

Guinevere shuddered in fear.

She could feel the murderous intent seeping from Athena's solemn voice.

"One's mortal rival, that god-slayer inhabits yonder island. That man — will be the first to be targeted with the awakening of the hero whose fate is to bury all devil kings. For the nearby Kusanagi Godou, inevitable it must be. Nonetheless, it is one's final wish to serve defeat to that brat..."

Athena's pubescent face had never shown this sort of tempting or seductive aura.

As the goddess' flirtatious gaze focused on her, all Guinevere could think was how to solve the current crisis!

"One hath been waiting for Kusanagi Godou to mature as a warrior. Before that time arrives, it would be quite inappropriate

to let that man awaken. In that case, one shall bury thee here, plucking this young sapling..."

The snake eyes were infused with a golden brilliance.

There was not an instant left to hesitate! So, make haste!

"Pray accept these apologies, goddess of snakes."

Boom! The sound of thunder and the apology descended from the heavens at the same time.

"That girl is this Knight's beloved child. Killing her is not permitted."

Dark clouds suddenly filled the sky, and a flash of white lightning descended — no.

Rather, enveloped by white lightning and riding a white horse was the knight in white armor, Lancelot du Lac! He proceeded to launch the barbed lance in his hands.

This attack turned into lightning once again, approaching Athena.

"Guh...!? Lightning and horse — the most primitive [Steel]!?"

Athena instantly distanced herself from Guinevere, jumping backwards.

The attack from the sky was evaded. However, in the instant before it struck the ground, the lance took a right-angled turn and continued forwards, flying towards the escaping Athena.

"Guh—!"

The lance of lightning embedded itself deeply into her left shoulder, distorting the goddess' face with pain.

"As the goddess of wisdom, could your sacred eyes not discern this Knight's true name... As a matter of courtesy, let this Knight announce his name. Lancelot du Lac. The Knight of the Lake as known by others."

Leading thunder and his white steed into battle, the war god descended upon the earth as he declared.

Part 3

"Sir Knight! Guinevere has always believed in Sir Knight!"

Lancelot simply nodded at her emotional cries of gratitude.

Turning his gaze towards Athena, he suddenly spoke.

"This Knight apologizes sincerely for the rude act of pointing a lance at an unarmed opponent like you without even a sword. However, this was done for the sake of protecting this Knight's beloved child. Pray grant your forgiveness."

"Fu — Even if forgiveness is withheld, that lance still continueth to attack."

Athena smiled despite her heavy injuries.

"One had almost forgotten, the mighty name of one called the [Steel] of mist and thunder. Rumored to have become the retainer of that man, it must be you!"

Athena was the goddess of wisdom and war, as well as the earth, the darkness and the sky.

However, was it because of the goddess' heavily weighted warrior aspect? The injured Athena displayed an exotic kind of beauty, full of imposing dominance. Being bathed in fresh blood simply contributed to her glamor like heavy makeup.

Lancelot felt like uttering the word "beautiful" in praise and admiration.

"Worryest not. Even if challenged by the lance, one shall respond with force. 'Twould be better to say, a little girl who knows not of battlefield etiquette would be truly shameful. Ultimately, Athena is the heavenly child of death and war!"

Athena suddenly grew in height, turning from a pubescent girl into a young woman of seventeen or eighteen years of age. With maturity came a sense of lively beauty and dynamic vigor. The beautiful girl's appearance and powers evolved all at once.

The shoulder wound healed itself, closing up and stopping the bleeding.

Like a grim reaper's iconic weapon, a scythe with a long shaft manifested in her right hand. Its blade was jet black. Embodying darkness and the earth — this was the weapon of the queen ruler of the subterranean underworld.

"Now then, comest with everything thou hast, Lancelot du Lac!"

"Much appreciated. This Knight expresses the greatest respect towards your courage."

Lancelot respectfully replied atop his horse.

Even though she had grown taller, Athena was still at a height which required looking up to him. She laughed fearlessly.

"...But war god, one knoweth. Surely thou art not complete right now, yes?"

"Oh? Very clever of you."

The process of undertaking Excalibur's rebirth and cancelling the guardian's spell started half a month ago.

However, Lancelot had yet to be revived in any complete sense of the word.

"One's wisdom informeth, thou art neither a [Proper God] nor a [Heretic God]. Staying long term in this intermediate state, thy

body hath yet to accustom itself to this world. In short, thou spendst the majority of thy time with a dazed consciousness, is that not so?"

Lancelot slowly nodded in response to the goddess' question.

"Admittedly so. For the sake of injecting vigor into this Knight's exhausted body, one must dive into thunderclouds every day to be struck by lightning. Without this, the body's link to the earth feels like it is separating. Thanks to you, this Knight no longer needs to wander around aimlessly."

Even while confessing his weakness, the knight remained relaxed and easygoing.

"On the other hand, well, there is no cause for worry. This Knight has proffered his utmost respect and thus will battle you to the bitter end, concluding with nothing but death itself!"

Faced with a duel to the death, completely and utterly dauntless .

As if seeing off blades of grass floating away on water currents without a care in the world.

"This Knight shall go full speed at maximum power to defeat Athena. Please understand that battle is what this Knight has long sought over thousands of days and nights, for this is Lancelot's style. Turning into madly blowing wind, becoming dashing galloping lightning, crushing enemies in an instant. Indeed, that is this Knight's way."

"Ha—! Well said. Should that be the case, one shall respond with everything as well!"

Athena took a giant leap.

This was a humongous leap that no bipedal creature could have taken naturally. In a single bound, she closed the 100m distance between her and Lancelot mounted on his white horse. She flew as elegantly as a white bird with feathered wings.

"O Earth, knowest one's determination! O Darkness, understandest one's rising emotion! As one along the matriarch's lineage, Athena hereby judgeth this follower of steel as the archenemy!"

The adorable voice was shouting spells words loudly.

Boom boom boom boom boom— With a terrifying sound that chilled one to the bone, the ground began to rumble.

Earthquake. The skies also began to darken, or rather, darkness was spreading out. Somehow, the broad plains of Thrace were suddenly plunged from daylight into a shroud of darkness.

"This Knight's lord... This hand defiles your divine remains, pray grant your absolution."

Lancelot quietly muttered as he calmly rode his white steed upon the shaking earth. Flying towards the sky, the divine horse and rider were completely unfazed by threats on the level of earthquakes.

"Tearing apart the ancient earth, penetrating the skies, Divine Sword that brings stars crashing down, now is the time for your return, to the hand of the Knight of the Lake, once again sounding the horns of war!"

From atop his mount, Lancelot extended his hand towards the white blade embedded in the shaking ground.

Guinevere had awakened the new Excalibur. Immediately, the 50cm white blade left the ground's surface, flying towards Lancelot's hand!

"Mystic powers of the Oak, lend your strength to Sir Knight!"

Guinevere immediately used magic.

An oaken shaft suddenly manifested on the summoned white blade, and proceeded to be held in Lancelot's right hand. The combination of the blade and the long shaft was truly like a [Lance].

Divine Lance Excalibur was born.

"The earth collapseth, the ground spliteth open, behold the goddess' violent song of destruction!"

As Athena began to chant, the ground beneath Lancelot and the divine horse collapsed.

The earthquake attacking the vast plains became even more intense, creating cracks in the ground. At the same time, black

snakes flew out from the raised ground, numbering in hundreds. Lancelot and his beloved horse were entangled and swept down by the snakes baring their fangs, trying to drag them into the earth.

"O Winds of mist, blow forth."

Upon his mount, Lancelot chanted.

Mist began to flow out from all around him. Furthermore, the knight and the divine horse's material bodies lost color and form.

The mist burst forth continuously, becoming thicker and thicker . It was like the dense fog that hangs over lakes, with a visibility of less than 5m.

"...Sir Knight, may fortune accompany your battle!"

Using flight magic, Guinevere fled for safety.

Seeing her off, Lancelot who had turned into mist, muttered:

"The Goddess Athena... a dangerous and formidable foe."

The authority of turning into mist was part of his immortality as [Steel].

Mist cannot be struck. Mist cannot be cut. However, Athena was the ruler of the underworld. She held the highest authority over everything related to death and immortality. It was only natural for her to be knowledgeable in the methods of sending immortal [Steel] to its grave — But there was a catch.

"However, encountering this Knight is truly your misfortune. This Knight is the galloping invincible divine sword that tramples innumerable dragons and snakes. Even Athena, or rather, precisely because you are Athena, defeat is inevitable."

He was currently displaying the martial arts of the sword which he had attained to the highest perfection.

This was the shocking strike of the ultimate dragonslayer. To Athena, this was a deadly weapon akin to a natural predator due to dragons and snakes being the violent incarnations of the great mother earth goddess.

Lancelot and the divine horse flew up in the form of mist, materializing in midair.

They flew into the thundercloud he had descended from when first summoned. Within the dark clouds where lightning crackled and sparked, the knight spoke softly to his beloved horse.

"Respond to the wish of the beloved child, smash apart the great and venerated foe, we shall take the form of lightning, and this Knight's life is entrusted thus."

Lancelot readied the divine lance, pointing its blade forward.

The white divine horse galloped forth. Towards the ground, where Athena was standing!

They had taken the form of lightning when saving Guinevere just now. But this time they were moving at lightning speed — god speed, and this time with extreme destructive power as well.

This impact and destructive power was comparable to a massive meteor descending from the heavens.

—Crash!

A white meteor crashing down with the speed of lightning.

It was a divine iron hammer that defies existence.

The white knight and divine horse descended from the sky, charging at the earth like a god of destruction. Reaching the ground in an instant, the divine lance was thrust out.

Athena brandished the jet-black scythe, intent on deflecting the blade of the divine lance.

This was the divine skill of the goddess who discerned the lance tip approaching with god speed.

Lance and scythe, the two weapons clashed together violently.

A storm was created at the moment of impact. In the eye of the storm were Lancelot and Athena while everything else in their surroundings were blown away by the cyclone formed by the impact.

The earth crumbled beneath Athena's feet.

Vegetation growing on the plains of Thrace, the land and rocks were all dug up and blown away.

The surface of the ground was transformed into a depression like a crater. The massive area dug out was roughly 2 or 3km in diameter. The atmosphere rumbled.

At the bottom of this crater-like depression, the goddess and the war god's clash intensified.

Athena absorbed the essence of the earth, infusing peerless might into her slender girl-like arms. Darkness materialized into nine demonic snakes which attempted to crush Lancelot in their jaws.

—However, the final result was most unexpected.

In the end, Athena's scythe was sent flying by Lancelot's divine lance. The demonic snakes of darkness were annihilated by the resulting impact.

It was achieved by a meteor crash descending from the heavens that collapsed the earth.

"Guh — gah, aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

Finally skewered through the chest by the divine lance, Athena gave off painful cries.

However, her snake-like eyes continued to stare at Lancelot. Relentless, her desire for vengeance continued to burn like fire!

The white knight kicked at the belly of the divine horse, intending on following through by severing the goddess completely. However, the goddess, pierced by the lance, gathered together the divine power of the great land, attempting to produce a force of repulsion to push back Lancelot in his white meteor form .

In kendo terms, it would be described as a situation of tsuba-zeriai.[2]

Truly worthy of the name of Athena. Lancelot generously praised in admiration as he called out to the girl he was protecting.

"Beloved child, now is the time to release the Holy Grail's mystical powers!"

(What is the matter, Sir Knight!?)

Guinevere's thoughts arrived, flying from far away.

"The Holy Grail has the property of absorbing the life force of great mother earth goddesses and storing it. Now is the perfect opportunity to obtain the life force of the highest ranking earth mother goddess! Do not miss it!"

(—! Understood!)

No further instructions were necessary.

A golden urn, the Magic Holy Grail, suddenly appeared beside Lancelot.

"!? Knight of the Lake, what art thou planning — oh?"

"Because simply defeating you will likely not be enough to overcome your immortality. However, it would be an entirely different matter if the Grail absorbs all your life force. Farewell, Heretic Athena. You were the most suitable formidable foe that this Knight had long awaited to battle."

From the wound where the divine lance Excalibur pierced —

The great earth mother goddess' life force of Athena was beginning to spill out and flow into the Holy Grail!

"This seemeth to be some mysterious technique!"

Athena wrapped the Holy Grail in black mist coming from her hands.

Lancelot could tell that it was a corrosive gas. However, the Grail continued to absorb Athena's life force. The golden vessel's lustrous brilliance did not falter!

"This is the infinite power offered by this Knight's lord, the vessel created by sacrificing the life force of the earth mother goddess equal to your rank, we call it the Holy Grail."

Lancelot explained nonchalantly to the shocked Athena.

"Seeming to be a material like earth, but not in reality. Divine wisdom, that which is symbolized by the truth of heaven and earth . Even for you, Athena, it cannot be destroyed."

"Guh... That so? It is like the Gorgoneion that one sought, an immortal indestructible vessel."

Her beautiful face in pallor, Athena murmured.

However, Lancelot was astounded by the goddess' pupils which had yet to lose their luster.

"One feeleth clearly. One's life force shaven off, devoured by yonder vessel."

At some point in time, Lancelot and the divine horse's motion had stopped. In the end, all effort had been spent in halting the meteor-like charge.

"This be the vessel that compeleth the maidservant of the white mother goddess to stoop so low? O Despair!"

By this point, the Holy Grail had already taken the lives of a good many mother earth goddesses.

Even Athena had no way of escaping. Nevertheless, the goddess did not lose the will to fight. She grabbed and forcefully pulled out the lance piercing her chest. Blood gushed out in a torrent from the piercing wound between her breasts.

Athena proceeded to display a smile of absolute despondency.

"However, one is the goddess of wisdom who claimeth all knowledge as her possession. A little toy like this Holy Grail, one never expected to discover it so soon had this body not

experienced it first hand. But then again, this doth not fit one's style, so one shall undertake revenge!"

Athena's blood-splattered hands slowly turned towards the Holy Grail.

Next, the great urn-like Grail began to fly towards Athena.

"Holy Grail that absorbeth life, one shall be keeping it!"

Athena reached out with her hands to touch the Grail, causing the great urn of a child's height to vanish in an instant.

It was absorbed into the goddess' body.

"One shall take leave for now, Knight of the Lake. Thou shalt repay the remainder at some other opportunity!"

Having devoured the Holy Grail, Athena began to sink into the earth.

Lancelot charged forth in pursuit and swung the lance.

However, it was too late. The lance tip only managed to pierce air.

"What a mess... Who could expect things to have ended like this ?"

"No, Sir Knight. Guinevere believes this result is absolutely not unfavorable."

Just as Lancelot shook his head ruefully, Guinevere answered, having returned by flight magic.

At the bottom of the crater-like depression marring the Thracian plain, the knight and the girl faced each other.

"Athena seems to have devoured the Holy Grail in order to suppress its effects. However, Guinevere does not believe this is enough to halt the functioning of the life-absorbing Grail."

Guinevere spoke as the one with a mysterious bond with the Holy Grail.

The divine artifact created by the matriarch deity of all the earth goddesses through sacrificing her own immortality and divinity. As long as that Grail remained active in the earth, it was forever indestructible.

"Even if we just let it be, by this point it must have stored up a substantial amount of magical energy. No matter what happens, from now on there is a connection between Sir Knight's divine sword and Athena's grail."

"Wielding the steel that splits apart the stars, is that so?"

Lancelot muttered. In the battle just now, he merely used it as a bladed object.

The steel known as the legendary Excalibur had yet to exhibit its true worth...

"But before that form can be attained, will she manage to remove the Grail from her body?"

"Even if that happens, it may be just as well. Having swallowed the Grail into her body to suppress it, Athena's return will not take more than half a month's time"

"Then Athena will die, is that so? In that case, it might not be so bad."

Lancelot nodded.

A "way" always appeared in the end.

Whether abandoned somewhere or separated by any distance, as long as the Grail existed on earth it would continue to absorb Athena's life.

The divine artifact created at the cost of immortal life —

This was its truly terrifying aspect. The wisdom and prayers of the goddess of death, had yet to be carved into the deepest reaches of the earth. On the other hand, the Grail's powers extended to the furthest ends of the earth.

"In that case, girl, Athena is of no concern for now?"

"Yes. Guinevere will now go to Japan, the island where master sleeps. Please grant your protection."

Lancelot silently grasped the reins of his beloved horse, flying towards the sky which had recovered its brightness with the departure of Athena. Still unaccustomed to the conditions of the earth, the full-powered attack just now had already exhausted his divine power.

He must take a good rest amongst the thunderclouds once again.

Heretic Lancelot —

Despite his overwhelming power of destruction, still could not be considered fully revived at this point.

Chapter 2 - Devil King and School Festival

Part 1

The great god-slaying Devil King.

In addition to that identity, Kusanagi Godou was also a high school student.

Thus it was only natural he would be participating in the school festival held at Jounan Academy where he studied.

Godou's class had decided to put up posters in the classroom about the local history of Bunkyo ward — a rather easy and uninteresting activity.

Hence, Godou was originally supposed to be relatively free after completing his assigned duties at the festival.

However, he never expected to be roped into helping friends out with their "shop" project.

The day before, he spent the first day of the festival helping the shop at the kitchen and procuring supplies. He was also supposed to be helping out on the second day which was also the last.

However, the planners of the project, Nanami, Sorimachi and Takagi (unofficially known as the Three Idiots) suddenly changed their minds in regard to Godou who was helping out despite having no original involvement with the "shop."

"Take the day off... That's what they said to me, but what was that about?"

On the first day of the festival, Godou was on the road home from school.

Making his way through the streets at night, Godou was deep in thought.

It would be a shame to waste a rare opportunity of leisure.

"In that case, why not spend tomorrow experiencing the school festival together with me, Godou-san?"

Mariya Yuri extended an invitation as she walked beside him on his left.

A soothing smile appeared on her beautiful gentle face.

The way she carried herself was the embodiment of the perfect Yamato Nadeshiko; with long lustrous hair tinted a shade of brown, her striking beauty contrasted strongly against her conservative and prudent personality.

"My duties at the tea ceremony club will be finished in the morning... In that case, it will be fine. Hikari will be coming in the afternoon as well. It will be more lively than going around alone—"

The young high class lady lowered her gaze slightly after mentioning her little sister's name.

"I-I feel that it would be most delightful if Godou-san could accompany us..."

Yuri added shyly. Her appearance and manner of speaking were most adorable.

The sheltered young lady who was not only prim and proper, but also solemn and serious, noble, and sometimes angry.

Godou found her frequent bouts of shyness extremely adorable.

"I see. Well then, let's go together tomorrow."

Thus he went with the flow and accepted immediately.

Somehow, Godou felt a kind of guilty feeling that "it is embarrassing to be together with girls."

"In that case, Kusanagi Godou, will you allow my accompaniment as well?"

"Of course, I can't leave Liliana all alone."

Godou also readily accepted the request of the girl on his right.

Liliana Kranjcar. A fairy-like beauty of Eastern European descent. The one who called herself his knight and grand chamberlain.

...Completely unaware he had just set himself up for the situation commonly known as "a lady on each arm," Godou continued on his way.

Thus began the second day of the school festival.

Meeting before his house at 10am sharp, Godou and Liliana set off for school together.

Recently, Godou found himself frequently spending time with her. The two of them would meet at his door without agreeing beforehand. It always felt like things happened naturally as a result of mutual desire.

Furthermore, the two of them had recently gained a kind of silent understanding requiring no words to communicate.

"In spite of everything, Japanese schools also have this kind of planned activity."

Liliana murmured to herself as she passed through the new school entrance.

This was a handcrafted entrance created specifically for the school festival.

"Schools in Italy would hold celebrations during Natale[3] and Easter, but never on this kind of scale. Though this kind of large scale activity takes a lot of time and effort to organize, I think the enjoyment of everyone is well worth it."

Liliana smiled. For someone who always insisted on being a " knight," this was a rare and gentle smile.

"Could it be that Liliana enjoys these kinds of activities very much?"

"Yes. I love decorating the home to make it all pretty for family parties and doing lots and lots of cooking. This festival is like expanding that kind of gathering to include all the students, right? I want to take part next year too."

The silver-haired knight spoke with a slight expression of delight.

It was unlike the occasional frantic expression she bore when faced with unexpected failure that broke her out of her usual solemn and imposing demeanor. Currently, Liliana's innocent expression made her no different from an ordinary sixteen-year-old.

"That's right. It should be very fun, isn't this great?"

Nodding, Godou recalled the other knight.

"A school festival... A *festa*[4] which student volunteers organize for themselves, ah... Basically just having fun, that's the main idea, right? It doesn't feel classy enough to welcome a guest of honor such as Erica Blandelli."

That was what the red knight said a few days ago before she flew over to Italy to handle some matters.

Smiling wryly, Godou tried to explain.

"I can't say your description is entirely wrong. However, it's a rare occasion in a Japanese school so I think you should at least show up. It should be okay for you to postpone going back a little, right?"

Well, a relative in Italy fell acutely ill... That was her fabricated excuse for returning home.

Was there a serious situation over there? Godou refrained from prying.

"You do have a point. Even if I have to suffer through a meaningless engagement, or tolerate an uninteresting salon in a residence of philistines, as long as my adorable Godou is there, I feel like I can still make memories to savor after the fact."

Erica smiled as she pressed her bosom against him.

Displaying her glamor through unintentional acts like this must be one of her true qualities.

"However, I'm afraid I'll have to pass, because there is a meeting I wish to finish as soon as possible. If I don't go to Italy now, I don't know when will be the next time my wish could be fulfilled... So Godou, please endure the void of my absence that no other girl can fill."

"...That was what Erica had said."

"It cannot be helped. To Erica and me, that matter is an issue of life and death."

Godou entered the rowdy and bustling school festival together with Liliana as he recalled the red knight's parting scene.

"So Liliana knows something about why she has to return over there?"

"Ah well, the fact is... Erica will explain in full detail once she returns successfully. Please forgive me for now is not the right time to let you know."

Something like that could happen. Godou's eyes widened in surprise.

Though Erica and Liliana were rivals, their fates were frequently bound together as one in various ways.

Godou decided not to pursue the matter any further, turning his gaze towards the interior of the school.

The path from the entrance to the school building was transformed by the festival from its usual appearance. Snack stalls were tightly lined against the two sides of the road.

Beverage stalls sold chilled drinks. Food vendors sold takoyaki[5], okonomiyaki[6], roasted squid, crepes, fried noodles, baby

Castella cakes[7], and various kinds of snacks. Furthermore, there were other stalls offering fortune telling, portrait sketching, photography, karaoke, flea markets etc.

People were really putting forth great effort.

Perhaps because Jounan Academy also included a university section, the high school's festival was influenced to some extent.

Walking further for ten minutes or so, weaving through a corner of the woods, they reached the destination.

The building known as the Japanese block.

"Last time we came here, Seishuuin Ena was also present. Will this occasion be the same?"

"Who knows? I tried calling her before the festival but couldn't reach her. Maybe she used up her batteries like always or went into the deep mountains with no reception again..."

Godou answered as he recalled the Hime-Miko of the Sword.

Despite being a high school student, she was a mysterious unpredictable traveler.

She could suddenly appear in unexpected places, but fail to show up when wanted.

The two conversed as they walked into the traditional Japanese room that was the size of twenty tatami mats.

This was the location for the "tea party" held by the tea ceremony club. Godou and Liliana entered after paying the entrance fee.

The room was furnished with a stove for boiling water and a few tea mats. The members of the tea ceremony club were serving customers with tea and snacks.

"Welcome to the two of you."

Yuri came over before Godou and Liliana who had sat down on the mats.

"My shift will be over soon, so please wait a while."

"Ah, understood... By the way, Mariya Yuri, so this is the attire of the tea ceremony club?"

The silver-haired knight spoke as if greatly impressed.

The members of the all-girls tea ceremony club were busy stirring and preparing powdered tea. This was a common club activity.

They were wearing kimonos rather than school uniforms as they sat on the mats.

"Yes, as a member of the tea ceremony club, I can only speak to you dressed like this."

Yuri replied slightly shyly.

She was wearing a beautiful kimono in the color of cherry blossoms. Frankly speaking, the other members of the club seemed to be unaccustomed to their attire and were quite stiff in their tea-pouring motions.

On the other hand, Yuri stood out with her natural movements and refined manners.

"I see, so it's like that... I was thinking why it was so strange."

Godou surveyed the place as the truth dawned upon him.

Offering only powdered tea and snacks, this place normally would not be popular with boys.

Nevertheless, one third of the current customers were young men. There were male students from Jounan Academy, male students wearing uniforms from other schools, and even older regular customers.

Naturally, their target could only be the girls dressed in kimonos.

It was an unpleasant thought...

Godou unwittingly reached this conclusion as he savored the taste of the powdered tea Yuri brewed for him.

Within the tea ceremony club, Yuri was also rather striking in appearance.

All else aside, she epitomized the term "beautiful young lady." It was apparent from a single glance that her graceful sitting form was in a separate class apart from all the other girls.

Kusanagi Godou was currently being served by such a girl, and had even brought along a silver-haired Caucasian girl.

"Is this the state otherwise known as overabundant self consciousness?"

"What's wrong, Godou-san? Does the tea not suit your tastes?"

"I, on the other hand, find the taste to be most exquisite... Or perhaps you are worrying over something?"

"Ah no, nothing much, don't be too concerned."

Though he forced a smile before the two observant girls, Godou shook his head.

Godou found his mind wandering into strange thoughts as a result of being accompanied by overly attractive girls. One should handle things with greater composure...

However, this thought was completely overturned within the span of a mere hour.

Part 2

"It truly was a wrong decision."

Godou grumbled with heartfelt emotion.

"What should we do now? How could this draw so much attention, I really don't get it... It's so vexing..."

Yuri, who was dressed in a kimono, carried a conflicted expression.

"We three should find a place to figure out why others are so interested in us. But even then, discussing furtively in secret is not an option, we might as well act with resolution."

Liliana stated with an awe-inspiring tone.

—Just before the lunch break, they had met up with Yuri at the end of her shift at the tea ceremony club. Yuri had appeared before Godou and Liliana in the same kimono she had been wearing at the tea party earlier.

"To create publicity for the tea ceremony club... The other members decided together that I should go outside like this..."

Yuri bowed her head shyly as she explained.

Since the school festival was in full swing, it was not particularly strange for people to be wearing exotic outfits. Nevertheless, Yuri in her cherry blossom-colored kimono was far too striking in appearance. Having Liliana by her side further exacerbated the situation.

Passersby were subconsciously or even overtly staring at them as they passed. Perhaps purely in terms of publicity, it was not a failure.

The trio went to watch drama and band performances, *konto* skits[8], friendship matches held in the sports grounds by the athletic clubs. Within the school building, there were also exhibitions, shops and other performances, etc. Though there were still quite a few attractions they wanted to visit, it was already time for lunch so they decided to stop for a meal first.

And so, the trio went over to the food stalls.

Godou: "(noticing Yuri's gaze of curiosity) Mariya you're actually interested in okonomiyaki? How unexpected."

Yuri: "Ah yes. Actually I have never eaten it before..."

Godou: "You can make it at home, right? I think for Mariya, it should be really easy for you."

Yuri: "(steady smile) "My mother made it before in her own home, and knows the method. As for eating this kind of food sold in festivals, I have yet to —"

Godou: "Never!?"

Yuri: "You are correct. When we were young, our parents never bought food at those kind of places because they were concerned with hygiene. So all this time until now..."

Liliana: "(looking like a know-it-all) It is true that one cannot expect too much in terms of hygiene. On the other hand, because it is this kind of place, that is why you can get a delicious taste that cannot be found elsewhere. If you do not give it a try, you will be missing out on one of life's pleasures."

Godou: "That's true. I often eat this during festivals like temple fairs."

Liliana: "Back in Italy I would frequent sandwich and crepe stalls. Eating on the roadside is nice sometimes."

Yuri: "Is that really true!? (frantic expression) T-Then in that case, now that there is this rare opportunity, I shall, umm —"

Godou: "(staring at the school festival program schedule) In the schoolyard there's Sanfu-sensei offering his hometown's Hiroshimayaki[9], and Ganba-sensei from Osaka with his takoyaki stall, wanna try them out?"

Yuri: "Yes, great!"

Yuri: "(violently knocked off balance by a passerby in the schoolyard)...kyaah!?"

Godou: "(catches Yuri in his arms) Are you okay, Mariya?"

Yuri: "(smiling in Godou's embrace) Y-Yes, thank you very much."

Godou: "(gazing at Yuri's smiling face) Oh that's good."

Liliana: "(began counting as the two of them remained tightly held together. 10 seconds, 20 seconds passed. Then she coughed deliberately) ...You two, do you not feel that your faces are a little too close? Kusanagi Godou, even though I know that you have an unusually deep relationship with Mariya Yuri, in such a situation could you not handle things in a simpler manner —"

Godou: "(frantically separates from Yuri) —!"

Yuri: "(gazes wistfully at Godou)....."

Godou: "W-What nonsense are you saying, I only caught her because I happened to be next to her, it's not like that."

Liliana: "Is that so...? My apologies. Regardless of your intentions, it is clear that your natural instinct is to eliminate distances between you and other females..."

Godou: "As if that kind of instinct actually exists! By the way, if it was Liliana instead, I would have done the same."

Liliana: "Eh?!"

Godou: "It's obvious. If I saw a friend in danger, I will surely offer help straight away."

Liliana: "(putting up a stiff front but appearing to be very happy)....."

Godou: "Well anyway, actually it's Liliana who always protects me instead."

Liliana: "T-That's right. Hypothetically, if such an emergency occurs, I do not mind being saved by you."

Liliana: "(having bought Hiroshimayaki) With such large portions, let the three of us share it together. Come try this, Mariya Yuri."

Yuri: "Thanks. (looking at the massive Hiroshimayaki) You are right, I would not be able to finish this alone."

Godou: "Certainly, this is a portion size more fitting for a male."

(The trio began to use their chopsticks to eat sliced pieces of the Hiroshimayaki.)

Godou: "(accidentally dropped his chopsticks on the ground) Ah, damn it. I'll need a new pair."

Liliana: "No need for that. Just share mine."

Godou: "Uhh, sure — (realizing this is an indirect kiss) W-Wait, that's not very appropriate."

Liliana: "D-Do not be concerned. Just like your relationship with Mariya Yuri can be described as unusually deep, the same can be said for our relationship as well..."

Godou: "♂♀!?"

Yuri: "E-Excuse me! If that is the case, then you can share my chopsticks too!"

Godou: "♂♀○×□!?"

(All of a sudden, the trio was caught in a three-way dispute.)

Godou: "Fine, in that case, I will humbly accept your wishes with thanks... (ended up alternating between using Liliana and Yuri's chopsticks to eat the Hiroshimayaki)"

Liliana: "Exchanging chopsticks repeatedly is a bit troublesome. I-If you do not mind then I shall feed you personally. (using chopsticks to bring Hiroshimayaki to Godou's mouth) T-This might be better."

Yuri: "N-Now that you brought it up, that is right... (with shy awkwardness) Uh, umm, if Godou-san wishes, I can also do the same... P-Please open up and enjoy."

Godou: "I'm not a child in kindergarten! I can eat by myself!"

Suddenly, they noticed that a crowd had gathered around, staring at them.

Due to it being the school festival, not only were there students from the school but also those from other schools as well as all kinds of residents from the neighborhood — male and female, old and young. This was the nature of the crowd gathered here for a spectacle. They were watching with shocked expressions that seemed to be saying "this is really novel" and were whispering to one another and secretly laughing to themselves.

"Isn't this getting a bit too crowded...?"

"I do not think that we were that loud, right..."

"Why are so many people gathered here to watch? We cannot be that interesting to them, right?"

At some point in time, some of the surrounding people started tailing Godou's group and maintaining a certain distance.

The most obvious group was all male and composed of youthful schoolboys. Bearing rude and hostile glares with impatient expressions... These were all signs that betrayed the negative emotions swirling in each one's heart.

Godou pondered with uneasiness. How exactly was this commotion caused? He'd better reflect well on it.

"For some reason we seem to be causing trouble for others. We should pay more attention."

"But Kusanagi Godou, even though I believe your behavior just now could do with a little improvement, you have done nothing wrong. So what should we do now?"

"Liliana-san, perhaps it is something we failed to be aware of? ... Ah, maybe eating like this on the roadside obstructs traffic, and causes trouble for others?!"

"There are many others eating the same way like this. I really doubt that possibility... Anyway, let's be more mindful, and go to the cafeteria —"

The three of them finished buying food and made their way towards a little unoccupied space beside a corner of the stalls.

Godou nodded in agreement with Yuri's suggestion and Liliana's observations. At that very moment...

"You people, what were you doing just now chattering away in some kind of discussion? Are you trying to perform some kind of three-man comedic routine?!"

Godou was shocked to hear this authoritative voice. He never expected this girl to appear here.

Turning back to look, he found his childhood friend, Tokunaga Asuka, standing before him with a furious expression.

"I wasn't even paying particular attention, but you three have been displaying public affection... I turn my gaze for a moment and

there you go starting to become even more intimate. Well, if it was just between an ordinary couple, it's not completely unforgivable. But what on earth is this? A lady on each arm? Or simultaneous two-timing? What is going on in your mind to flaunt this kind of ridiculous relationship out in public!?"

Asuka expressed her displeasure, firing accusations like rapid fire.

She possessed a prim and proper face as well as the twintails hairstyle she maintained since long ago. Like the Kusanagi household, she was also a resident of Nezu's Area 3.

"Well, Godou, got any retorts to defend yourself? If you have any, be out with them."

分焼き

"What retort... We weren't doing anything intimate. It's just normal contact between friends, that's all."

"Yes... My humble apologies, I cannot understand what you are trying to say."

"It is true that there exists a strong bond between us that surpasses normal 'friendship.' However, you are mistaken if you believe it is of the sort of indecent relations you were insinuating."

Yuri was perplexed. Liliana spoke with agitation. Godou nodded in complete agreement.

After all, Asuka had always been the type to get angry over reasons that were far removed from the actual truth.

"Really! Embracing each other in public, having indirect kisses and then being fed with 'yes, ah~' Well, since it's Godou, it's expected... Let me ask then, what are these people like normally?"

Asuka turned to the people behind her.

Standing there were Yuri's classmates, the girls Sawa-san and Miyama-san.

"There had been some restraint before, but recently it's always been like this."

"Yes yes. Previously, it's even worse when Erica-san was around. In fact, today's situation can be described as rather subdued instead...?"

The lenses of glasses-wearing Sawa-san flashed as she spoke. With an immature face and undeveloped body like an elementary school student, Miyama-san responded with a question.

Yuri nodded to greet her classmates who had suddenly appeared.

But just as Godou was wondering why these two girls were together with Asuka...

"Sawa-san and Miyama-san both work together with me at the same shop. Yeah, the family restaurant on the side of the main street. You should know it, right? Anyway, they invited me to the school festival today."

Extremely observant, Asuka immediately explained for Godou. She was a girl with a strong intuition and quick wits.

"Right, though Liliana-san had already been introduced to me at Godou's house, who is the beautiful lady here? She looks very graceful and lady-like."

"Ah, now that I think about it, you two have never met."

Seeing Asuka's slightly concerned gaze towards Yuri, Godou replied.

"Mariya, this fellow here is my long time friend Tokunaga Asuka. We live on the same commercial street. She goes to school at Tokyo Metropolitan High which is closer to home. Also, this —"

"My name is Mariya Yuri. It is my pleasure to be acquainted with Godou-san's close friends."

Yuri, who was dressed in a kimono, calmly bowed her head.

Though she was not particularly talkative, her greeting clearly displayed her excellent upbringing.

"H-Hello, nice to meet you. The silver-haired foreigner, the super perfect high class lady, as well as the rumored blonde girlfriend, things are really developing towards complete despair for me... Truly an extraordinary fellow. As expected, I can't let you out of my sight — hmm, I cannot allow myself to become one of those old ladies crying tears of sorrow over grandpa Ichirou..."

Backing down uncharacteristically, her mumbling speech after " nice to meet you" was difficult to make out.

Being eloquent in virtually all situations was one of Asuka's qualities.

"I think we should leave first. Being the center of attention is disruptive to the surrounding people, so let's go somewhere else."

Wary of people's gazes, Godou made a suggestion.

The interference of Asuka had only served to further garner the attention of bystanders.

Yuri and Liliana immediately nodded in agreement. Sawa-san and Miyama-san were also planning to leave, having made their greeting.

— But then someone stopped them. Of course, the one calling out was Asuka.

"W-Wait a minute. Are the three of you planning to continue your flirting elsewhere!?"

"Like I said already, what flirting! You're always trying to find strange bones to pick."

"Still completely oblivious... You really are a great big idiot who makes me want to despair!!"

Still as sharp-tongued as ever. And scolding all the time.

However, witnessing the familiar antics of the childhood friend gave an oddly reassuring feeling.

Godou wryly went "So, see you later" and continued walking ahead.

"No other way, with agonizing contemplation I have made my decision!"

Thus, Asuka declared out of the blue.

"It looks like I can't limit supervision to just the school festival. Sawa-san, Miyama-san. I am very sorry but there are things I must do. Please allow me to remain behind and act independently — I have the duty to keep this idiotic man under surveillance!"

Part 3

Thus, Tokunaga Asuka added herself to Godou's entourage and they entered the school building together.

In contrast to Asuka's complete hostility towards Godou, Liliana and Yuri were acting in a subdued manner.

"Listen to me, Mariya-san and Liliana-san."

Asuka chatted eloquently as they walked.

"Even if this guy frequently speaks of 'common sense,' don't be taken in by those lies. He is completely untrustworthy. I will help and support you girls if you tell me you were victims of his deception. If you run into any kind of trouble, feel free to discuss with me no matter what."

She showed concern for them with great gentleness while disparaging Godou at the same time.

"Is that so? Rather, I feel that Godou-san is a person who works hard at acting sensibly."

Yuri objected with a conservative description.

"If Mariya-san really believes that, then I have nothing further to say. Or perhaps you might recall all sorts of little things? Once anyone gets into a certain level of familiarity with him, I'm sure they will notice something is amiss."

"...Nothing like that. Right, Liliana-san?"

"...Ah. The nobility of Kusanagi Godou's character and behavior is fit to be a knight's role model. I think you are slandering him most inappropriately, Tokunaga Asuka."

Repeatedly questioned, Yuri and Liliana seemed to be responding hesitantly for some reason. Not only did the two of them avoid making eye contact with Asuka, the one posing the questions, but also with Godou as well.

The atmosphere turned awkward and unpleasant all of a sudden.

"Ah, isn't this Uncle? Good morning to you."

A passing "maid" greeted him.

In actual fact, she was dressed in a sleeveless mandarin gown with a frilled apron, a costume differing greatly from a traditional maid outfit. Furthermore, she was wearing cat-eared decorations on her head.

"G-Good morning to you too."

It was clearly noon already. However, there existed many service industries that used "Good morning" as a greeting regardless of the time of day.

The China-themed cat-eared maid was running around dressed like that, carrying a stack of flyers, most likely trying to promote publicity.

"...Wait a minute, Godou, what was that about?"

Asuka immediately questioned him.

"That kind of cosplay girl not only knows you, but even calls you 'Uncle'!?"

"Hmm. It's a long story. There's a shop in the festival opened by some acquaintances. I helped out for a bit, so that's why they call me that."

"What kind of suspicious shop is that!? I must check it out."

"Eh? Now?"

Asuka's threats seemed to be giving Godou pause.

It's not a particularly strange shop anyway, so I might as well take her there. But that also meant taking everyone else along.

"It is the shop opened with Lu Yinghua's support, right? I have no objections."

"Ah, the one from Hong Kong... Right, I too, feel a little curious. "

Since Liliana and Yuri supported the motion, Godou yielded and nodded in agreement.

They arrived at a certain classroom on the third floor of the school building.

Nanami, Sorimachi and Takagi, backed by Hong Kong's Lu family, had opened the "China Cat-Eared Maid Cafe and Tea House" with business in full swing.

"Business today is lively as ever."

Upon witnessing the prosperity of the shop, Godou commented casually.

A continuous stream of customers had formed a long line at the entrance.

The place offered brewed Chinese tea as well as Chinese dimsum delivered directly from the "main store" at Akihabara. The cosplay team of China cat-eared maids was standing on duty to serve customers. The mandarin gowns emphasized the curves on their body, and the high-slit dresses were quite daring and sexy.

Authentic Chinese style. The reason for the long wait in line was obvious.

The team of China cat-eared maids was composed of employees sent from the Lu family's maid theme park in Hong Kong (to customers they appeared to be girls studying at the school).

The Three Idiots' original proposal of "Cat-Eared School Swimsuit Maid Cafe" was vehemently opposed by the girls, and was thus altered to the current form.

"I knew it, wearing swimsuits when there's no pool would have been quite strange..."

Godou concluded as he surveyed the surroundings.

However, the girls eventually relented on the cat-ear issue as a result of the Three Idiots begging on their knees.

"Not some kind of suspicious shop, right?"

"It's really borderline... However, why are you the 'Uncle'?"

Asuka glared at Godou as they waited in line.

In truth, it was the maid team's boss, Lu Yinghua, who addressed Godou as "Honored Uncle"... However, let's keep quiet about that. Trying to explain the whole story would take forever.

"Ohoh, it's my dear friend!"

The one calling out was Nanami.

He had just stepped out of the neighboring classroom they had borrowed to use as the kitchen and backstage.

"Thanks to you, the shop's business is booming on its second day... Though losing the "Cat-Eared School Swimsuit Maid"

concept is painful, we obtained the current overwhelming success instead. This is all thanks to your introductions — don't be modest, Kusanagi."

"Hmm, well, it's good to be of help. But 'dear friend' is too much ."

"Kukuku... What a modest fellow you are. However, thanks to this I finally understand something. Kusanagi, your satisfaction as a riajuu[10] only runs skin deep — you are actually tired of plain and ordinary life, for you are a man who yearns for excitement and the extraordinary!"

Godou was shocked to hear his secret exposed.

The deadly battles of the Devil King Campione were obviously unknown to Nanami.

"I... As a fellow comrade, I understand. Kusanagi, your eyes swirl with dark burning flames only possessed by men who pursue the way of the maid enthusiast."

"Ah, this? No, I don't have that kind of interest, you must be mistaken."

"Hohoho, you have yet to realize it, that's all. I feel it is necessary to guide you along that path with something I have specially prepared. Here, borrow this for now."

Nanami went back into the classroom and took out a paper bag.

He shoved the object over. Contained in the bag was a handheld gaming device and a software package.

"But I don't usually play games."

Godou looked at the software. Its title was "English Proper Maid Story — Maid Amy."

On the packaging was an illustration of a girl. Without particularly ostentatious colors, the modest yet subtle design somehow felt rather attractive.

"Try playing it when you have the time. You should be able to experience the shocking revelation of a lifetime... Oh no, I was in the middle of going out to buy something. Sorry I have to go. See you later!"

"You sure make strange friends everywhere..."

Seeing Nanami leave noisily, Asuka was just about to have another outburst.

"—Ah, Hikari. Yes, so you have already arrived at the school?"

Yuri had taken out her cellphone to answer.

She was giving directions to the China Cat-eared Maid Cafe.

"Will little Hikari get lost? Let me go pick her up."

"I believe she is very competent. Do not worry, we will wait for her here while we line up for the shop."

Yuri offered her opinion with a gentle smile.

It was true. Godou recalled Hikari's personality and nodded in agreement.

After ten minutes, the Mariya family's second daughter arrived.

"It's been a while, Onii-sama. Same for Liliana-neesama... Ah, I've never seen you before. Hello, nice to meet you. I am Mariya Yuri's sister, Mariya Hikari."

Hikari not only greeted the people she knew but also bowed her head towards Asuka. Her attention to detail was well beyond a typical sixth grader's. However, her next words belonged to no ordinary elementary school student.

Witnessing Asuka's familiarity with Godou, Hikari suddenly commented.

"I can see that you are quite familiar with Onii-sama. In fact, once I'm a little older, I also want to stay by Onii-sama's side to receive his love. When the time comes, I will be in your care? ...Ah, but who knows, I might have more seniority by then!"

She was displaying an innocent yet "womanly" smile.

Hearing Hikari's statement, Asuka' face began to convulse.

"......I-Is that so? Just to make sure, in what year is Mariya-san's little sister currently studying?"

"Sixth grade. I will be entering middle school next year."

"Oh, I see... Wait a minute, Godou! Are you going to let this complete mess develop further? You have truly overturned all of my expectations!"

Godou answered Asuka's furious snarls with irritation.

"Don't go accepting strange ideas so easily. Do I really have to take an elementary school student's words seriously? Use your brain a little. Hikari only says that because she looks up to me, that's all."

"Yes. To me, Onii-sama is even more important than a real elder brother."

Giggling cleverly, Hikari responded.

Even though she sounded like she was hiding some sort of subtle hint, Godou was not concerned. She was just an elementary school child. It would be ridiculous to take her words seriously.

Now that he thought about it, the other girls had also been more or less alarmed by Hikari previously.

"Liliana also makes strange statements all the time. If you insist on interpreting things that way, Asuka, you're going to make Hikari and her sister Mariya feel uncomfortable."

"Yes... Kusanagi Godou is correct."

"Right. After all, Hikari is still a child, yes..."

Liliana spoke knowingly as Yuri nodded in agreement with a conflicted expression.

As the subject of discussion, Hikari smiled sweetly in response to the comments of the older girls.

"Yes, I am still a child, so the future is far away. I look forward to receiving everyone's care in the future."

Then Hikari leaned tightly against Godou. This was a rare display of open affection that felt a little different from a younger sister's.

Godou stroked her head a few times. Hikari smiled in return.

"...In three years, no, two years, that kind of future will be here."

"...Actually, I would not be surprised if that stage arrives in two months."

"...If the child has already decided herself then there is no helping it..."

Asuka, Liliana and Yuri murmured softly amongst themselves.

What do they mean? Godou was perplexed. Furthermore, for some reason the situation felt like an alliance was being formed between the three girls —

Not too long after that, the group was finally able to enter the shop.

"China Cat-eared Maid Cafe and Tea House."

Despite the small budget, the interior of the classroom was well-decorated in Chinese style.

Godou and his group were seated next to the window. They ordered Pu-erh tea[11] and several snacks according to their numbers.

"Well then, Uncle, your order will be here shortly."

The China cat-eared maid spoke cheerfully and returned to the kitchen.

Of course, she was greeting Godou who had been helping out at the shop yesterday.

"On further thought, this shop is really suspicious after all. The waitresses don't really seem like students and they look especially well-trained. Furthermore, that maid's Japanese is a little awkward , could she be Chinese or Korean?"

Asuka calmly pointed out.

Since she had been working at a family restaurant, she was probably familiar with the skills of the maid team.

"Godou sure knows some really weird people. What kind of connections caused you to help out at this shop?"

"Well, all kinds. It's purely by chance that I became friends with a certain someone who is bad news."

"Ah, Onii-sama also helps out at this shop? I didn't know this shop happens to have connections with Hong Kong's Lu family."

Hikari glanced repeatedly at the striking and elegant figures of the China cat-eared maids with great wonderment.

"Could it be possible that Onii-sama has this kind of preference? Cosplay or the like!?"

"No, not at all. I've never even paid attention to it."

"Really? If you don't mind being honest, I can do it too. I can wear those outfits for Onii-sama to see!"

Hikari's words nearly made Godou spit out his Pu-erh tea.

"I-I really appreciate your offer, but it's not going to happen."

"What's going to happen? Then it's really true after all?"

Asuka interrupted with skepticism.

Treating me like some sort of eccentric again — Godou decided to just ignore her.

"Hmm, Tokunaga Asuka, can you tell me the reason you think that?"

Suddenly, Liliana began to pursue the matter.

"It had already occurred to me before, that you seem very familiar with Kusanagi Godou's past. What is the basis for your judgment? For example, did he ever display an obsession over any type of clothing or the like?"

"Certainly, I have also had my suspicions."

Even Yuri was nodding in agreement.

"Like Liliana-san said, Tokunaga-san is someone who can offer special insight into Godou-san's personality. If you do not mind, pray enlighten me."

Yuri and Liliana were consulting Asuka together!

Why? Godou was shocked. In this gathering here, why was there a certain sense of consensus appearing in the eyes of the childhood friend, the Hime-Miko and the knight —?

"Eh, well it's not really definite proof..."

Suddenly faced with these requests, Asuka seemed to be in doubt.

"But I get the sense that he keeps changing his mind rapidly for things he claims to have no interest. Whenever he says 'isn't this fine?' I keep wondering if he actually thought before speaking?"

"...No, the ability to make bold decisions is one of Kusanagi Godou's strong points after all."

"...I agree. Godou-san's reaction speed towards changing circumstances is exemplary."

Asuka's words seemed to have struck a deep chord with Liliana , and Yuri murmured in agreement.

Could this encounter turn out to be highly unfavorable for me? Godou was beginning to feel a vague sense of unease.

Part 4

The second day of the school festival had finally reached dusk.

Since dusk had arrived, it was time for the usual campfire and evening festivities. The packed and eventful schedule included folk dancing and the announcement of the Miss High School winner.

...As a side note, this year's winner of the Miss High School title was Erica Blandelli.

Hearing the announcement, Godou was completely bewildered.

Obviously, she was not going to appear here, having excluded herself from participating in the school festival. Even when asked earlier, she had replied:

"If you really miss my beauty then be my guest and use photos or whatever... But I'm not going to do anything troublesome. I participated in a similar event once in Italy and found it completely tiresome."

That was how she had declined.

Along with the participants gathered on the stage, the screen was playing a video of Erica that was clearly filmed in secret. (As another side note, Erica had been recommended by an acquaintance to enter a regional preliminary round of the Miss Italy competition. Though she qualified straight away, she grew impatient and left halfway through the proceedings.)

In spite of all that, she still won by a landslide.

On the other hand, this could also be attributed to her rivals Yuri and Liliana's resolute refusal to participate. Still, it was rather telling that a voyeuristic video was able to overwhelm all the other competition.

Godou marveled in amazement at Erica's ridiculous exploits as he climbed the stairs, finally reaching a door at the top.

"That guy must be up here, right?"

Beyond the door was the roof which had been shaded orange by the setting sun.

A cursory glance found no one there. It was still early so the late night festivities had yet to begin. Otherwise, the movement of

lively fire light would have been visible from participants surrounding the campfire below.

Godou had received a text message earlier that told him to wait on the roof.

"My apologies for calling you here, Honored Uncle."

The greeting arrived with the wind.

What an incredible voice. It almost sounded as if the autumn breeze was whispering in his ear.

This was a technique of qigong masters. By infusing "qi" into their voice, they could converse with cult members across vast distances.

Godou walked to the center of the roof and looked around... And finally found him.

Standing in a corner was the young master of Hong Kong's Lu family, Lu Yinghua.

"Sorry to have you wait, Yinghua."

"No, not at all. Compared to Honored Uncle giving up time that could be spent with the various Nee-san, this is nothing."

Lu Yinghua smiled with candor. Despite his handsome youthful appearance, it was a rather acute smile.

Inserting biting commentary into a simple explanation. Pointlessly provocative. Eccentric and hard to get along with.

However, from Godou's point of view, he was the arrogant and reassuring "nephew."

It reminded Godou of the personality of the genius pitcher he had worked with back in his baseball days.

"By the way, Honored Uncle, what do you have there?"

"Hmm? Ah, Nanami lent this to me just now... No, actually he just shoved it over."

Lu Yinghua had noticed Godou's paper bag which contained the game "English Proper Maid Story — Maid Amy."

Opening the paper bag to have a look, the young martial arts master stared with dumbfounded amazement.

"...I've actually heard quite a few rumors about this game."

"Eh? Is it actually quite famous?"

"Yes. Ever since the computer version was first sold at a doujinshi fair several years ago, its development has expanded over time to become a commercial success known all over the world. It has also become a consumer game. Last year it was even animated, with DVD and BD sales reaching ten thousand."

"...Looks like Yinghua is quite knowledgeable about it."

"Well, it is related to our business after all. I only started researching it recently."

What would his master say if she knew her disciple had begun honing expertise in this area?

Godou was reminded of his beautiful sworn elder sister.

"Anyway, I plan on checking out the game's content to catch up with Honored Uncle."

"But I haven't even decided when I'm going to play this. How about we start it together?"

"Good idea. In that case, Amakasu-san appears to be an expert in this area, should we call him as well? As for the location, let me make the preparations..."

As the casual male talk(?) reached a conclusion, Lu Yinghua brought up the next issue with unhurried words.

"Actually, the purpose of my visit is to inform Honored Uncle about the Divine Ancestors."

"...Ahah. The one called Asherah, right?"

The witch who was mind-controlling the young master of the Kuhoudzuka family. Godou had completely forgotten about her.

"I remember it was Liliana who told me. A bunch of eternally young witches who were transformed from goddesses of ancient times, and much stronger than ordinary magi?"

"Yes, though they cannot compare to the various Campiones."

Godou felt puzzled, was it because they were fallen goddesses?

However, how did it come about in the first place?

"Back then, I spent a fair amount of time with Asherah. She frequently contacted someone and I managed to overhear the name. Another Divine Ancestor called Guinevere. She is the mastermind who provoked the fight between Master and the Great Sage Equaling Heaven."

"So that was what happened!"

"It should be unlikely for this woman to embroil Honored Uncle in her schemes immediately, but I just thought it'd be best to report to Honored Uncle first."

"Thanks. Sorry for troubling you with all sorts of things."

"No, don't mind it. When I get abused — no, scolded... Or rather , when Master gives me special training, I hope I can depend on Honored Uncle a bit. It's good to know I have someone to rely on in case of emergencies. So anyway, you are really welcome!"

Lu Yinghua spoke in a rare moment of passion.

This guy admires and worships me for very practical reasons. Godou understood very well. It was only natural given the existence of a master like that. Oh well, I'll try to be as good an uncle as possible.

Just as the thought crossed Godou's mind, Lu Yinghua suddenly perked up his ears.

"Ah, I can hear Liliana-neesan and Yuri-neesan's footsteps coming from downstairs. Aren't they looking for Honored Uncle?"

"That's some superhuman hearing... Even though Seishuuin can do something similar."

"Compared to that Nee-san, my eyes and ears are still quite sharp."

Hearing footsteps through thick layers of steel-reinforced concrete, and even identifying their owner from the sound —

Lu Yinghua, the one who had showed off such ridiculous hearing, began to laugh.

"By the way, I am stronger compared to Erica-neesan while my body is lighter compared to Liliana-neesan's. On the other hand, I cannot cast spells, so that means we're basically equals... Right."

From the tone of Lu Yinghua's voice, it was clear he did not actually believe in his assessment of "equals." Seeing those eyes of disdain made Godou feel like objecting. What was this feeling that compelled him to defend his female companions?

"But last time, didn't you end with a draw against Liliana?"

"Under those conditions, it was impossible to tell who would be the victor between Master and Honored Uncle. I couldn't commit the folly of unintentionally killing a Campione's close associate and incurring a king's wrath... Well, I did show my true skills back then and didn't make any mistakes, but I refrained from using any truly underhanded tricks of murder."

Lu Yinghua had not reached Erica's level of subconsciously expressed arrogance. On the other hand, his personality did have calculating and tolerant facets. Godou found him to be an interesting fellow.

"However, in order to face an unfair technique like Ena-neesan's divine possession, it's necessary to completely master a life-risking trump card. After all, Erica-neesan, she..."

"What about Erica?"

"That Nee-san is a true female fox and a real warrior. After all, she must have grasped the subtle truth and is now training accordingly. She's not a swan that shows off its appearance while struggling with paddling feet underwater!"

Ultimately, was Lu Yinghua a genius who could analyze everyone to their core? Rivals who were constantly evaluating, contending, and sparring to gauge one another's ability. Realizing he was surrounded by an amazing group of people, Godou was deeply impressed.

Part 5

While Godou and the rest were enjoying the school festival —

Erica Blandelli was at the ancient city of Siena in the northern Italian region of Tuscany.

It was a little city with a long history of prosperity dating back to the Roman Empire. The remnants of medieval streets and historical areas were famous World Heritage Sites.

Piazza del Campo was probably the most highly renowned of these sites.

The plaza was built on a gentle slope and shaped somewhat like a bowl. It was surrounded by structures such as medieval palaces, water fountains, and bell towers.

The world's most beautiful public square — indeed, that was what it was called.

Erica's destination was a place near Piazza del Campo.

A Sicilian gelato[12] store which must have been quite popular with the locals.

However, no matter how delicious gelato tasted, it was merely ice cream. Going home for this purpose would have been ridiculous.

Of course, Erica was meeting a certain character well-known for troublesome antics and often criticized as a fool.

"Vanilla, strawberry, pistachio, almond... I'm having such a tough time choosing the flavor. But if I eat all four, surely it's too much."

"Having three in November is also too much."

"I've always had a habit of visiting this street for gelato whenever winter approaches. It's like eating hot food in summer is good for the body, you should eat cold stuff in chilly weather to get used to the cold. If you do that, you'll avoid catching colds for the winter."

"In short, you have further plans to visit other places to feast on frozen desserts, is that correct?"

"Yup. Today I'll be going to as many shops as I can, so I'm holding back a bit at the first one."

"...Did you know, Salvatore Doni?"

"Know what, my dear and trusted friend, Andrea-kun?"

"In certain countries, it is commonly believed that the ignorant do not catch colds. Perhaps that is the reason why you were safe...! Have you any idea how much your sudden notion to return home has disrupted the schedule!?"

"Andrea, you're usually such a wise man! But 'Fools don't catch colds' has no basis, you know. For you to believe such a superstition, it looks like you're quite ignorant in certain areas!"

"Stop spouting nonsense, you idiot!"

It was a conversation that would give anyone listening a headache.

Indeed, Salvatore Doni the "King of Swords" was a knight from Siena.

Erica had hurried back to Italy as soon as she received news that he was returning to his home town under the supervision of his butler, Andrea Rivera.

...A short while later, a blonde young man stepped out of the store carrying a triple portion of gelato accompanied by a haggard glasses-wearing young man.

"Eh, it's been a while, Erica Blandelli."

"Oh, what a rare visitor. When did you return from Japan?"

The two greeted Erica as soon as they noticed her.

During their first meeting, Doni had completely failed to register Erica's name in his mind, but now he was able to greet her normally. This was not because he memorized her name after so many encounters...

It was purely due to Kusanagi Godou's existence that finally made him recall Erica's name.

Doni's inability to remember names was not due to poor memory but a lack of interest.

Anyone not an enemy was like a roadside pebble to him. That must be the way he thinks.

"We have not met since Sardinia, Sir Salvatore. Thank you for taking care of me back then, Sir Andrea."

The king whose foolish appearance disguised his horrifying unorthodox talent. And the butler who assisted him.

Erica displayed a gorgeous smile.

"If you have any matters to discuss, please be my guest and talk to Andrea? I'm going to eat my gelato..."

"No, that is not the case this time. I have a request to make of Sir Salvatore."

Erica swiftly addressed the [King] who instinctively avoided cumbersome responsibilities.

"Me?"

"Yes. Remember the first time I met Sir Salvatore, when you dueled with Dame Saint Raffaello?"

"Hmm, this is really bothersome. But now that I recall, you were there too."

"At that time, Sir Salvatore had inherited the 'Book in Praise of David's Great Works' from Saint Raffaello. I would like to request permission for myself, as well as Dame Liliana who is not currently present, to read that book once more."

"Master's book? Book eh...?"

"Sir Salvatore, I once accepted Saint Raffaello's request to safeguard the San Gimignano grimoire."

Aware of his master's vague memories, Andrea Rivera stepped in to provide assistance.

Even when addressing his longtime friend, he was a righteous and honorable man who always kept personal and business matters separate. Certainly, the "book" must be under his safekeeping.

Erica nodded.

Exactly as expected, which was why she deliberately approached them when they were together!

"Dame Erica, that book has been expressly 'concealed' under Saint Rafaello's orders. Even as the curator I have never read it. Permission is only granted to those who are about to rise to the rank of paladino. In regard to your request, I regret..."

"That's what I thought."

As befitted the fair and righteous "King's Butler."

Erica greatly admired his strict adherence to noble principles, not even excepting himself, but she continued to plead.

"However, please be informed that granting permission to me would be favorable to Sir Salvatore's interests."

"My interests? What is going on?"

"Yes. If I were to master the secret arts of battle magic that can rip apart fallen angels and pagan gods, then that will contribute to Kusanagi Godou's combat potential... Rather, perhaps I can become something like a shield that can bolster his development."

"...Really? I see, I see. That's the implication."

Licking his gelato, Doni's expression changed.

A certain sense of acuity had subtly crept into the handsome face that had been like a carefree little baby's. Anyone unfamiliar with his personality would likely have missed it.

"A more hot-blooded fellow would have gone 'That's about it?' ' Sure, let's go again?' when things ended. But to reject outright, Godou sure is a tough customer."

This acuity was not exactly fighting spirit or murderous intent.

A belief that the so-called "friend" and rival will inevitably be encountered again on the battlefield. This much was certain.

"Having a decisive duel with that fellow requires an appropriate time. He needs to have the proper motivation, otherwise he'd try to run away and end things meaninglessly. But while I'm waiting, I can't have Godou getting killed so easily."

Doni looked upon Erica with an expression of utmost joy as if he was Cupid having spotted true love.

"What a fellow who always worries others. Even though he says he hates fighting, he keeps charging into the battlefield. Is this what Japanese culture call tsundere?"

The "King of Swords" chatted away, discussing the good rival he acknowledged.

His assessment was surprisingly accurate. Perhaps Salvatore Doni was a kindred soul who could understand Kusanagi Godou very well.

"Very well then. I have great hopes for him. Until the day we meet each other again on the battlefield, having him work hard on all sorts of things is not a bad idea."

Rivera frowned in response to this statement of approval. But a [King]'s decision could not be reversed.

Erica reverently bowed her head in gratitude towards Salvatore Doni.

Part 6

On the coast of Kisarazu City in the Chiba Prefecture.

Nearby was the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway — a toll route from the Kanagawa Prefecture to Kisarazu across Tokyo Bay.

This place was also next to an industrial zone, and quite close to the Kisarazu city streets, as well as the prefectural administration at Chiba City.

However, this beach was extremely quiet. In warmer times there would be waders and summer swimmers. But it was currently November, and the marine breeze was mixed with rather chilly air. It was not the season for outdoor activities.

"...How relaxing, Amakasu-san."

"...Yes, it is very relaxing. Ena-san."

Ena mumbled as she nibbled at her cup noodles while Amakasu concurred, munching away at his bun filled with red bean paste.

The food had been bought from a rustic fishing village next to the beach.

"Will someone suspicious really come? We've already staked out this place for three days already. Not a single soul appeared... And this is the first time for me to find out this place is also managed by the Committee. But isn't there nothing here?"

Ena grumbled as she looked down at the place.

The beach was opposite the windbreak plantation. Directly before their eyes was a red torii. Other than the lone torii standing in the empty seaside, there was nothing else. Not even a shrine or a little hut.

"You're very right. I'm surprised too."

The indifferent and insincere History Compilation Committee member agreed.

Both him and his boss belonged to the Tokyo branch of the Committee. However, its territory was actually more vast than the name implied, for it extended all the way from Tokyo to Chiba, Saitama, Kanagawa, Ibaraki, Gunma and Toshigi...

In actual fact, it would be more accurate to call it the domain of the Kanto region supervisor.

"By the way, Ena-san, aren't you going to the school festival being held at Kusanagi-san's place?"

"Eh? What is that?"

"At the school where he studies. I remember the festival was scheduled to start yesterday. But because I had to be careful to avoid mentioning anything to do with 'going over there,' I kept silent about it."

"Hmm... Now that I think about it, that kind of activity should be occurring this time of the year."

As for Ena's habit of not attending school seriously, it began all the way back in middle school, no, elementary school.

Although members of the Seishuuin family were obliged to go into the mountains for serious Hime-Miko training, it resulted in Ena being unfamiliar with basic facts of school life.

"Damn it~ It's not that often for festival events to be held, if only I could have a chance to have fun with His Majesty... That's so bad of you, Amakasu-san, why didn't you tell me sooner!"

"Wait a minute, it wasn't just me. Kaoru-san also knew and withheld the information."

The History Compilation Committee Tokyo Branch Chief was the Hime-Miko, Sayanomiya Kaoru.

Without any hesitation, Amakasu outed her as an accomplice.

"On the other hand, even though he looks like he can't be bothered to deal with women, he is a king who is unexpectedly diligent in all the crucial areas. It is possible that he called to ask ' come if you are free' on this occasion. Did you charge your cellphone properly?"

"Forgot all about it... Which means it hasn't been charged for a week..."

"May I express my utmost sympathies. Well, as compensation, let's kill time by chatting instead."

Amakasu said to Ena, her shoulders slumped in disappointment.

"This area used to be called Kazusa Province, Awa Province, or something like that in ancient times. To us, it is a location that is a little special."

"Really? But I still don't see it."

"What are you talking about? Isn't this ocean the tragic stage where the hero of our nation, Yamato Takeru, had lost his queen? As an outdoor shoot location, this place is not bad at all."

Amakasu cast his gaze beyond the windbreak plantation, upon Tokyo Bay extending into the horizon.

This finally prompted Ena's memory. A famous story in Japanese mythology.

"You should know the story where Yamato Takeru[13] used the Sea of Bousou as his stage. Yeah, the one where Oto Tachibana-Hime cast herself overboard to calm the stormy seas."

"Of course. 'I pray thee let me go into the sea, and so let the person of thy mean handmaiden be given to redeem the life of the Prince's Augustness'... Something like that."

Ena was the Hime-Miko well-versed in classical learning and martial arts.

She had just quoted from the *Kojiki*[14].

The hero Yamato Takeru was crossing the sea at Sagami Province — in modern terms it would be taking a ship to cross the Tokyo Bay from Yokosuka City to the Chiba Prefecture on the opposite shore — to reach Kazusa Province and the events were passed down as legend. The ship was met with a violent storm after setting off, and the sea had become dangerously turbulent. In order to restore calm to the crisis, the queen, Oto Tachibana-Hime jumped into the ocean to "redeem the life of the Prince's Augustness."

"Occasionally — perhaps once every couple of decades, strange phenomena related to the legend starts circulating. Here, please have a look at this."

"Hey... This is pretty interesting."

Amakasu had taken a book out of his bag.

It had a rather nondescript title of "Oral Traditions of Kazusa Province, Complete Collection." The binding of the book was also extremely modest and plain.

Ena quickly browsed through a short passage on the page in front of her.

"...'Queen Oto Tachibana-Hime, jumped into the sea with sword embosomed. Sea currents carried her sword to a location of neither land nor sea, whence a floating island subsequently appeared.' I've never heard of this?"

Her relics, the comb and clothing of Oto Tachibana-Hime, later drifted onto a beach... This type of little story began circulating once the queen was worshiped and enshrined as a deity.

"That's more than likely. This book was self-published three months ago by a researcher of local history. In order to keep the contents of this passage buried in obscurity, we had to do many things to recall the books and even paid the author a little visit."

"Were memory manipulation spells used to wipe his memory?"

"Yes, for the sake of caution, we entered a request for the Hime-Miko organization."

Further details beyond that must be top secret. Ena was shocked . Amakasu was relying on a subgroup of the Hime-Miko who were able to use memory manipulation spells — the spirit power called [Name Concealment].

They must have been looking for a particularly powerful form of memory tampering.

"The organization which later gave rise to its successor, the History Compilation Committee, had kept this legend out of circulation for the past couple hundred years. Eliminating memories of witnesses and tampering with written records. But it was not enough. Every few decades, rumors would rise up again elsewhere from another person. It is as if someone keeps repeating the legend to others. Or perhaps, on this land lies dormant a mysterious being that secretly reveals its existence to others..."

Ena posed a question after pondering indifferently.

"This method of handling things, must certainly be the orders of grampsy and his group?"

"Yes, since ancient times — I believe it must be close to a millennium when the most ancient of the ancient clans gave their instructions. Regarding the legend of the floating island and the divine blade appearing at Kazusa Province, as well as the Heavenly Reverse Halberd[15] which must be kept hidden."

The Heavenly Reverse Halberd? A term she had never encountered before. Ena began to stare at the torii before her.

If this isolated empty field was being used a secret hiding spot, then certainly —

"How astute. Indeed, the Reverse Halberd is beneath the torii, buried underground. Multiple layers of strict barriers were cast."

Amakasu explained after noticing the direction of Ena's gaze.

"As for the 'grass' keeping this place under surveillance... We received a secret report from them that there have been recent unidentified instabilities... Which suggests the comings and goings of a powerful mage. That is why it was decided to assign guards here."

"And so Kaoru-san called Ena here."

"Yes. She had an ominous premonition. It would be best to have the strongest person here."

This was likely the result of Sayanomiya Kaoru's spirit vision which was on quite a proficient level. An enemy that could only be repelled by Ena the user of divine possession —

Just at that moment, Ena sensed someone's gaze.

"We're being watched, Amakasu-san? Probably nearby, but not here. It's a high level far sight spell. What are we going to do? In case the perpetrator actually makes a visit."

She drew the bag beside her closer.

Contained within it was a Japanese sword with a two-foot-three-inch blade. It was Seishuuin Ena's personal weapon .

She began inspecting the area with her sharp beast-like senses. Her instincts were also exceptionally sharp, to the point of being aware of being secretly watched through magical means... She felt a shift in the gaze.

The gaze overlooking the surroundings of the red torii were now focused on Ena alone.

She had only felt the other's presence for less than two minutes. Amakasu remained silent, preparing for emergency measures to respond to any crisis. What should they do? Was it coming?

...Nothing came. The gaze vanished and the presence could no longer be felt.

"Escaped. Looks like the other party is very cautious."

"Perhaps they found out that Ena-san is the trump card? Or could it be some other reason..."

Ena relaxed her state of heightened tension as Amakasu scratched his head in puzzlement. They continued to converse.

"Why not simply transfer possession to Erica-san?"

"Hmm? What's that?"

"Since the enemy already knows about the bomb buried at this location, we might as well dig it out and hand it over to an expert who loves to play with fire in munitions stores."

Then he took out his cellphone. No mistake, it was to obtain Sayanomiya Kaoru's authorization.

Realizing the intentions of the frivolous but very capable special agent, Ena was delighted. In that case, it was time to meet Kusanagi Godou again after so long!

The two of them were not aware, that the one watching Ena just now was Divine Ancestor Guinevere.

Furthermore, this was the opening scene to the adventure of the divine sword Excalibur...

Yet another deadly battle was about to begin.

Chapter 3 - Athena Reappears

Part 1

Work was proceeding cautiously under strict security.

Big clumsy machinery (seemed to be called cranes?) was being employed to excavate a target below the the red sacred seal (called something like torii).

— King who manifests at era's end.

The secret to his location lies dormant in this coastal holy sanctum.

The place was much more crowded than the last time Guinevere had visited. The hidden guardian of this place had been able to vaguely sense this land's "life force."

Even though Guinevere had concealed herself using magic, the other party seemed to have sensed her presence slightly.

Due to the sudden increase in alert level, Guinevere had quickly retreated.

"As feared, things will not progress that easily."

Using the [Witch's Eye] to enhance her vision, she was watching the excavation from afar.

She had originally intended to revisit this beach in the Far East to seek out its secret. But the local wizards seemed to be planning on entrusting the secret to the Campione. While the uninteresting machines were engaged in digging, the joint effort of several dozens of wizards had released the underground seal. Guards were also set up to prevent interference.

Amongst those dozens of people present were skilled swordsmen, ninjas, wizards and miko on standby —

The most troublesome opponent of all would be that sword-wielding miko who could use divine possession. Guinevere had seen her last time when the Great Sage Equaling Heaven had appeared. It would be prudent to avoid a frontal confrontation with this girl.

"It is still too early to lay Guinevere's life on the line. Rather than stand around helplessly, it would be better to reverse the situation in the opponent's hand."

Seeking assistance from Lancelot's might... Was not an option she considered.

Even though he was the knight who served Guinevere, he was a deity with all things considered. If a pertinent level of respect was not maintained, their bonds would likely grow progressively weaker.

But then again, making a request to that lowly human would really be ridiculous to the extreme.

"Kusanagi Godou-sama who defeated the Great Sage Equaling Heaven... Already exhibits the might of a god-slayer. Come to think of it, Athena called him her mortal enemy..."

Just as Guinevere was analyzing the developing situation, she noticed "movement."

"She came as expected, Goddess Athena. Coming to send Guinevere to the grave instead of sitting somewhere waiting for her demise."

(—Beloved child, this Knight is fit for battle.)

Whispers were carried to her ears, from wherever Lancelot lay resting.

(If the goddess reappears, just meet her in battle. Truly, she is a formidable foe... But it will be an excellent opportunity to make contact with the Holy Grail. If we succeed, the Divine Sword of Salvation will also be able to retrieve its true power, and Athena's immortality will reach an end, sending her on her way to hell.)

It was a very attractive proposal, but Guinevere shook her head.

"No, let's not do that yet. If you go all out like previously, the time required for Sir Knight to recover will be further delayed."

With roughly ten more days before Lancelot would recover his true power, there was no point in overexerting themselves. After all, other heroes were available to battle the goddess —

"Stay hidden for now. Today is definitely not the right time to meet Athena."

Guinevere activated her magical powers of a Divine Ancestor.

Dissociating her witch's body, she became one with the air, and flew away riding on the wind.

Erasing her trail as she ran away in this manner, even Athena would have difficulty tracking her down.

"Tsk, was one a step too tardy?"

Clicking her tongue in disapproval, Athena was standing on a seaside cliff in the form of a young girl.

Her gaze pointed towards the white waves crashing upon the cliff. There had been a minute remnant of Guinevere's lingering presence. However, it had now vanished —

"Forsooth, 'tis the Holy Grail within one's body... Alerted the prey."

Athena murmured to herself.

Thanks to swallowing the Grail, she now understood its nature fully.

"As long as this object remaineth in one's body, 'tis impossible to approach the descendant of its creator?"

Guinevere was the witch born from the white matriarch deity's reincarnation.

She had apparently fled as soon as she sensed Athena approaching. If nothing changed, this situation would only repeat time and again.

"Is there no way to send that witch to her grave, and stop that man's revival...? Hmm, 'tis one's destiny to defeat Kusanagi Godou . But as things stand, he cannot defeat that man. For no god-slayer can prevail against that man once he awakens."

If that was the case, what could be done? What could Goddess Athena do?

"— Fu. One had wished for a ripened opportunity, but the time for harvest hast arrived. One shall have a decisive showdown against Kusanagi Godou here."

If this life persists after the duel concluded, then Lancelot will be forced to pay back his dues at that time...!

Her remaining time was not abundant.

Having made her decision, Athena displayed a brave and fearless smile.

The goddess' battle spirit roused, the waves beneath intensified in turn. Violent winds blew across the sky to answer to the goddess' raging spirit.

"Superbly done, war god Lancelot. As befitted proper [Steel] inheriting the ways of ancients. Desecrating one's immortality in this manner!"

The swallowed Holy Grail continued to erode her life from within.

The immortal goddess's life was gradually absorbed by this divine artifact. Slowly but surely, Athena was approaching death.

"Hohoho. Were one to take this Holy Grail and crosseth over to the [Boundary of Life and Immortality], perhaps this life may persist indefinitely..."

There were occasional [Heretic Gods], tired of endless wandering, who chose to live secluded in that world.

It could very well be Athena's one and only path of survival.

"Nevertheless, one is not obliged to take that path. Letting the riotous spirit rage in war, and choosing the path of battle is what befits this goddess. One shall first defeat Kusanagi Godou, then Lancelot shall be vanquished. If this life lingereth still, justice shall be met upon that maidservant, and vengeance brought to that man ...!"

Precisely because she had transcended mortality, she was not one to struggle for the sake of prolonging her life.

Death was welcome as long as all those unaccomplished tasks could be settled without regret. When the time comes and her

power is fully depleted, she will lay down upon the earth and pass away as if entering eternal slumber.

Athena was not only the tripartite goddess, but also the goddess of war.

As the end drew near, would it not be particularly meaningful to embrace death as the goddess of war?!

Standing before the turbulent eastern sea, Athena felt exhilaration as her emotions rose to new heights.

Part 2

On the Friday after the school festival had ended, Kusanagi Godou was going to Chiba Prefecture. The day before, he had received a phone call from Seishuuin Ena.

"Hello, Your Majesty, please! I hope you can help!"

It was the first time ever for him to receive a call from Ena. This was the girl who seldom used modern tools of civilization with their intended purpose.

"Sure, if it's within my power... Is it something troublesome?"

"I'm afraid so. Ah, but Amakasu-san said Your Majesty once accepted a similar request from Erica-san, so it shouldn't matter."

"Something Erica once requested..."

Godou was reminded of all sorts of unreasonable demands she had forced upon him before.

They all pretty much sowed the seeds for future conflict with gods.

"The worst time was when she forced me to bring back the stone medallion which drew Athena to Tokyo."

"Yes yes, that's exactly it. There's a medal-like thing that we want Your Majesty to safeguard for us. It's still being dug out of the ground, but it'll probably be ready tomorrow or the day after."

Last time he had been entrusted with the unforgettable Gorgoneion. It was a medallion with the mother earth goddess' wisdom engraved on it.

Well, it can't be helped. Godou sighed.

This was like volunteering himself to finish the job. It meant helping Ena, Amakasu and the rest of them even more in the future. Starting around spring earlier this year, he had been completely sucked into involvement with the supernatural world —

Godou lamented to himself as he answered.

"Understood. I'll help. What do I need to do first?"

"We will welcome Your Majesty here tomorrow. Ena is currently at Chiba, oh?"

The next day after that phone call was a bright and sunny Friday.

After returning from school, Godou lied about staying at a friend's place for the weekend before setting off from home.

Having arranged a ride with an acquaintance beforehand, he waited at a nearby main road. A common silver domestic car stopped briskly before Godou on the roadside.

Godou was shocked to see the person at the steering wheel.

It was the androgynous Hime Miko, Sayanomiya Kaoru, who resembled both a handsome youth and a beautiful lady at the same time.

"Actually I just received my driver's license, so let me be the chauffeur for today."

She winked and explained as he sat down on the passenger seat beside her.

Come to think of it, she (often feels like a he) was in her third year of high school.

Even if she had just reached eighteen years of age, it was sufficient to get a normal official license.

"Thank you for your efforts... But Kaoru-san seems to be quite familiar with driving?"

"Yes. I 'just happened' to get my license recently. On the other hand, having a car is a lot more convenient when going out with girls to various places for fun. In the past, I sometimes carried authorization under another's name, and it often proved to be useful."

Kaoru's control of the steering wheel was very steady. Somehow, Godou felt like verifying if she might drive recklessly like a novice...

"It feels quite incredible when I realized recently just how many amazing people are around me, leading normal lives..."

"Hmm, this could very well be called 'birds of a feather, flock together.'"

Kaoru replied cheerfully to Godou's exclamation.

Furthermore, she was suggestively grouping herself with Godou and his other strange companions together.

"Well, from this moment on, I will be the proud driver in charge of our journey. Do you want to go for a spin and pick up girls? I'm sure if Godou-san partners with me, we're in for quite a catch!"

"I'm not used to hitting on such a large number of girls!"

Kaoru continued to drive steadily as she made her unsettling suggestion.

Along the way they picked up two girls. Mariya Yuri and Liliana Kranjcar.

Both of them in casual dress, Yuri was wearing a one-piece dress with a matching knitted top while Liliana was dressed in a short-sleeved blouse, jeans and a halfcoat.

"So, now that everyone is here, I will briefly explain the situation."

Kaoru spoke slowly as soon as they got on the Shuto Expressway.

The Hime-Miko and History Compilation Committee executive revealed an incredible legend.

Queen Oto Tachibana-Hime, jumped into the sea with sword embosomed. Sea currents carried her sword to a location of neither land nor sea, whence a floating island subsequently appeared.

"Now that it's mentioned, Kazusa and Awa are certainly places with deep ties to Yamato Takeru no Mikoto and Oto Tachibana-Hime."

Yuri the Hime-Miko was the first to nod in agreement.

"Is that so, Mariya?"

"Yes. Godou-san should probably know already—"

Yuri proceeded to recount the last moments of Oto Tachibana-Hime. It was a most familiar story.

"The place where Takeru no Mikoto and Hime set off to sea, called Hashirimizu, still exists in Kanagawa Prefecture. Shrines were built in worship of Oto Tachibana-Hime as a deity on both sides of Tokyo Bay in Kanagawa and Chiba."

It was the story of Yamato Takeru that Godou knew from childhood.

For Tokyo Bay to be involved in that setting... Godou was honestly surprised.

"The interesting thing here is that the surfacing rumors always involve Oto Tachibana-Hime. Even the discontinued version had a part about Yamato Takeru and Hime."

Kaoru provided supplementary details.

"The prestigious sword and its owner the Noble One sank into the sea, floating towards 'the island where there was neither land nor sea.' When the sword reappears on earth, the Noble One shall reawaken... That is what was said."

"In that case..."

Liliana suddenly interrupted.

Since the conversation topic had been about Japanese myths which were outside her expertise, she had remained silent until now.

"What this fantastic legend is really trying to convey, is not the final moments of Hime, but the whereabouts of the sword... Is that not correct?"

"That could very well be true. At least, that was how Amakasu-san and I got our hands on this matter."

Kaoru expressed agreement as she continued to drive.

"Regarding this issue, I have a whole list of questions I'd like to ask the Elders. Originally, a policy of absolute secrecy was enforced over that place for a very long time, most likely over a thousand years. But since an explosive situation is definitely unavoidable, we thought, why not just add Kusanagi-san to the mix to detonate it."

"It is a rather helpless situation, Sayanomiya Kaoru."

"Well, not exactly. As a secret matter related to gods, there is always a high probability that Godou-san will be involved eventually. In that case, why not call him in from the very start?"

"I see. If you put it that way, I certainly agree."

Liliana nodded in agreement with Kaoru who had just described Godou as if he was a walking bomb.

Godou was about to object with indignation.

"That said, is there actually a Noble One in eternal slumber with the sword? In this world, there is no such thing as an island in a place with neither land nor sea. The description is virtually the same as King Arthur and Excalibur sleeping in Avalon the land of the fairies."

The silver-haired knight mused further, surprising Kaoru.

"As befitting of Liliana-san. Amakasu-san had also made the same observation. Yamato Takeru, King Arthur, and the war gods of steel are all implicated in this legend."

Thus, a dangerous statement was made.

The car carrying the group entered the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway from the Kawasaki-Ukishima junction.

Passing through Shuto Expressway that was illuminated by a shade of dusk, they entered the tunnel that traversed Tokyo Bay. Continuing forward would reach the parking area of the Umihotaru artificial island. From there, the Bousou Peninsula could be reached via the Kisarazu link route.

As the stage where a myth took place, this sea could be traversed in dozens of minutes.

"The so-called floating island is commonly believed to be the ' Palace of the Floating Island' where Yamato Takeru's father,

Emperor Keiko held his banquets when he was visiting his sons in the Kantou region."

Kaoru explained along the way.

It was almost dark by the time they reached Kisarazu. Kaoru stopped the car somewhere near the coast.

"I've been waiting for everyone!"

"Ah, a very great welcome to our special guests from far away."

Two familiar faces approached as they got off the car.

Seishuuin Ena and Amakasu Touma. Ena was wearing her usual uniform while Amakasu also had his usual sloppy suit. In that regard they were a rather good match for each other. Along with Kaoru who was impeccably dressed in a winter jacket, this notion of usual attire was further reinforced.

"Eh, Erica-san didn't come?"

"She said she was busy and had to return to Italy."

Ena muttered "hmm" in response to the simple explanation.

A frantic expression flashed across her face. But Ena ignored Godou's gaze of curiosity and went on to greet the others.

Yuri smiled in response to Ena's usual enthusiasm, while Liliana greeted generously.

"By the way, can we talk for a moment?"

Amakasu called out, not to Godou, but to Yuri and Liliana.

"An object called the Heavenly Reverse Halberd is currently being excavated. To be honest, it's impossible to guess at this point what the thing will look like. Therefore, we hope you two can lend your eyes of wisdom."

Basically they wished for assistance from the power of spirit vision.

In response to the request to "view" the excavation site, Yuri and Liliana replied in the following manner:

"I cannot be certain if anything will be seen, but let us go to its vicinity for now."

"I see. Perhaps as a witch, I might be able to assist the investigation."

"...Do I have to go along?"

Without thought, Godou asked. Because he was slightly intrigued.

"Oh, Kusanagi-san, all things considered, you still have many other matters to attend to."

"Umm, yes, can Your Majesty accompany me for a bit?"

—? Godou found it rather strange. The laid-back special agent had many hidden interests. Be that as it may, his tone of voice was slightly different from usual. This time, it was a serious tone of voice.

But before Godou could voice his doubt, Ena held him by the hand and dragged him away.

"Then I entrust all matters to everyone. Especially you, Kusanagi-san, please handle things appropriately."

Amakasu, Yuri and Liliana on one hand. Godou and Ena on the other.

As the two groups departed for different destinations, Kaoru bid them farewell with a strange remark.

Part 3

"So Seishuuin, what do you want me to do?"

Walking along the beach at night, they were on the Kisarazu shore facing the sea of Edomae.

Godou spoke to Seishuuin Ena's back as she walked ahead of him.

"Why do we have to come here? I feel like there's nothing to see here."

The coast at night was completely devoid of people.

The two of them had walked for close to ten minutes along the beach. The only light sources were street lamps from roads in the distance, starlight and the white glow of the half moon.

Well, there were no inconveniences since Godou had excellent night vision.

Ena was probably the same. But then again, what was the point of taking this walk in the night?

"Probably about time? Actually Ena has a request to make of Your Majesty."

"Request?"

"Yes. Actually, Ena only found out about Your Majesty's school festival after it had ended."

Ena stopped and turned around. Facing Godou, she stared at him with a nervous expression.

"I see. I tried calling you, hoping you could come in case you were free, but couldn't get through."

"Umm, it's like this... But anyway, Ena thinks it's quite a shame."

Though gloomy for an instant, Ena immediately recovered her spirits.

"I missed a rare chance to enjoy a festival together with Your Majesty. Because of that, I asked Yuri and Liliana-san to let me have today to enjoy with Your Majesty. Starting now."

"So that is what you mean by request?! Which is why we deliberately came to the beach..."

Godou felt like surrendering.

"I knew it. Then Amakasu-san and Kaoru-san's unnatural attitudes were because they were part of the conspiracy!?"

"Yes. Those two knew about the school festival but remained silent about it. I threatened them to make up for it, or else I'd withdraw my assistance. Luckily Erica-san isn't here, so we won't be disturbed."

It had been mentioned before that the Hime-Miko were not subordinates of the Committee. They were honored guests who provided assistance through invitation.

Nevertheless, it was probably unnecessary to lean on authority for a matter like this.

Ena acted even more coyly towards the stunned Godou.

"Hey, Ena would sometimes like to have some private time with Your Majesty, may I?"

Now that it was brought up — it finally occurred to Godou. He had never spent any time alone with Ena. Almost every time there were others present.

"...Well, occasionally should be fine."

Intentionally avoiding someone for the sake of being with someone else was not Godou's preferred way of doing things. But it was true that he had very little opportunity to spend time alone with Ena.

He certainly could not bear to turn down her openly expressed good will.

"As expected of Your Majesty, it's exactly what Ena wants!"

"But how are we going to enjoy ourselves? There's nothing here."

A beach in early winter. Furthermore, it was night.

During daylight hours on a warm day might have been fine, but the current conditions were really not quite suited for amusement.

Well, the winter constellations shining in the sky could be thought of as a backdrop, while the rustling of breaking waves could count as background music. Alone with just the two of them. The stage was set for a romantic and dramatic scene. But what terrible casting of actors!

For the current two people present, this situation was a bit too inappropriate?!

"Look, an empty can over there. Let's play kick the can?"

"It's no fun with only two people, right? Or maybe it's not that fun anyway."

Just as expected, the conversation quickly became awkward and meaningless.

If the other person was Erica, Liliana or Yuri, she would likely have taken other measures to get intimate.

Nevertheless, Godou felt reassured.

Although he had gained some familiarity, he still did not have much confidence in getting along with girls.

"Ah, there's even a soccer ball here. Back when Ena was a child, I'd mix myself into the boys' games and defeat them completely."

"But then again, beach soccer isn't something for two people to play..."

Ena recalled her childhood memories of personal athletics.

She must have been the type to dribble the ball alone, repeatedly penetrating the defense to score.

He already had one of those super athletes amongst his companions — Erica, who relied on individual performance even in team matches. Ena was probably the same kind of player as her. If they played baseball, they would probably be trump card fourth hitter material.

"Well in that case, it finally comes to this? There happens to be two, just the right number."

Ena bent over to pick up two branches, each less than a meter long. Most likely driftwood brought to the beach by the waves.

"This is a duel between two people. Ena versus Your Majesty one on one would be nice."

"Nice? I can't defeat Seishuuin that easily."

"Ah, come to think of it, Your Majesty doesn't know any swordsmanship or martial arts. If other people went through the same experiences as Your Majesty, they'd probably rush off to learn some self defense in a last ditch effort."

"Really? But I don't think it'd be particularly fruitful."

Godou was reminded of Salvatore Doni.

That man's existence was proof of the fruitlessness of that course of action.

For idiot Doni, only training in swordsmanship was meaningful . First of all, he was an unorthodox genius, and secondly, mastery

of swordsmanship would enhance the power of that guy's authority.

In contrast, Kusanagi Godou was not a genius. Even if he trained for fifty years, he would probably not develop martial arts to a level that could match gods or Doni.

In that case, he should figure out how to use his own advantages to match those monsters instead —

Because following the same path as that guy is definitely not the way to defeat him.

...No no, wait a minute.

Could it be possible that as a Campione, Godou himself had already been deeply influenced by that idiot?

Godou began shaking his head in an attempt to dismiss the unpleasant possibility.

"Anyway, let's first decide how to play with this thing... How about this?"

Godou received a branch from Ena.

Using the tip he drew a large tic-tac-toe grid on the beach, and marked the center with an "O."

"Your Majesty wants to play this... If that's the case, Ena will follow suit."

Ena drew an "X" on another spot.

Finally, the two competed in games of tic-tac-toe.

"Together with the kids who played baseball, I used to play this a lot."

"Ah, I know it. As a child, I only had occasional free time. Though many children had handheld games, Ena did not."

"Seishuuin always played outdoors when you were a child like me?"

"Uh huh. Probably until third grade or so. Very naughty, right? But very soon, swordsmanship and Hime-Miko training began. And there were other things to learn too. Often traveling to the mountains, Ena no longer had time for those kinds of pastimes."

"Ah... So Seishuuin had all sorts of responsibilities. You must have been quite busy."

The child of nature who took pride in her swordsmanship. The talented girl equally well-versed in classical learning and martial arts. As a Hime-Miko, a Yamato Nadeshiko skilled in various areas .

Her complicated experiences could not have been cultivated in one day. Godou's childhood achievement was improving his baseball ability. Overall, he felt he could empathize with the great sacrifices Ena had made for the sake of building up all those accomplishments.

"I can't come to Your Majesty's side very often these days, which is why I wanted to see you at the school festival. Now that I think about it, I have never gone out for fun with Your Majesty and the rest of the group."

Ena continued to talk as she played tic-tac-toe.

Rather than an intensifying competition, it was more like a game for killing time as they chatted.

"If that's the case, just come next time."

"Eh?"

Godou's expression naturally became very warm and gentle.

Without really knowing how to express her femininity, Ena's personality was rather simple and laid-back. There were a couple unnecessarily stubborn aspects and occasions when she was very hard to get along with. But they could all be attributed to her unusual upbringing, which likely gave her little chance for normal social contact.

"I still have two more years before I graduate. Even if you missed this time's, Seishuuin, you can still come next year. So like I said, there are more chances. I will gladly accompany you any number of times."

It was hard to believe, but Seishuuin Ena was a very easy girl to get along with.

There was no other girl that he could spend time like this as if she was a male friend. She would be most welcome to visit any time she wanted.

Concluding with such a feeling, Godou smiled reassuringly.

"Ah okay. Thank you, Your Majesty. I'm very happy to hear that coming from you."

"You don't have to thank this kind of thing. That's too polite."

"Ah, but then again, isn't Your Majesty frequently in danger? Isn't it a concern whether you'll live to see this time next year? But don't worry, no matter what, Ena will always guard Your Majesty with her life!"

"Don't say something so foreboding. I still intend to live a good life and die peacefully!"

The two chatted casually, joking around. But Ena suddenly frowned.

She threw away the branch and stood up. With a wary gaze she surveyed the surroundings. Without asking "what's the matter?", Godou also stood up silently.

It was at this very moment that the intruder's identity was revealed.

"It's here, Your Majesty. Please be careful."

Ena whispered softly. The Hime-Miko of the Sword directed her gaze towards the other side of the beach — near where a boat was parked.

A young girl was approaching from there. The familiar face of a beautiful pubescent girl. Nevertheless, that power and solemnity emanating from her body definitely belonged to no ordinary human.

"...It's her."

Godou felt his body brimming with power, having entered a state of battle.

He had already sensed immediately that the one approaching was a god, the mortal enemy of every Devil King Campione. However, her identity was most unexpected, even to Godou.

The young goddess slowly made her way over. Heretic Athena was her name.

Part 4

"How fares thee? Kusanagi Godou!"

The goddess called out loudly. Her eyes were entirely focused on Kusanagi Godou.

She completely ignored Seishuuin Ena beside him. To Goddess Athena, even the premier Hime-Miko's existence was akin to weeds or pebbles on the roadside.

On the other hand, the Hime-Miko of the Sword took out her Japanese sword from its bag.

She entered a battle stance — But Godou signaled with his eyes, ordering her to stand down. This opponent was out of her league.

"One arriveth once more, to ascertain thou fulfillest thy promise of past."

"Promise... That one?"

In the battle against Perseus, Athena had bestowed upon him the hint to deciphering the mysterious divine hero's identity.

Without a doubt, he had a made promise then. He definitely had to return the favor and accept one request from the goddess.

"One hath but a single wish. A duel, Kusanagi Godou."

Athena's eyes were infused with golden light.

Fluctuating with a seductive brightness, those serpentine eyes flashed brilliantly in the dark night.

"Like blazing fires which die down and burn out before long. Like wind strongly swirling into a vortex, gone quickly like the passage of a hurricane. Thou shalt fight with one and scatter the beautiful sparks of battle!"

"What!?"

Even though he had been instantly bewitched by the snake's seduction, Godou immediately yelled out.

"I should have said so at the time. I will not accept requests that bring trouble to others. Have you any idea how much destruction will result from a battle between us!?"

"When a god dueleth a god-slayer, 'tis only natural for the people to be sacrificed."

Such incomparable stupidity — was what Athena's eyes of despise seemed to be saying.

"Certainly there will be sacrifices if we fight. Dost not forget, thy fellow humans trample grass and flowers beneath their feet as they walk the earth. 'Tis the same principle."

Sigh. Realizing what the goddess was trying to convey, Godou had nothing more to say.

After all, gods were all identical in this regard!

"Such are the constant ways of heaven and earth. Worryest not thyself, Kusanagi Godou."

Gods were set apart by their mentality of not caring for any individual human.

All humans on earth were indiscriminately grouped together as simply "humanity." Even if half of the world population were to die, it would only feel like "oh, humanity still survives" to them.

This must be why the concrete thought of "people died, cities destroyed, trouble caused everywhere" never occurred to them?

That was what Godou reckoned.

"Our battle shall cause people to collapse, the earth to suffer, and the heavens to sigh. But no matter, humanity and nature constantly endures suffering for endless repetition. We only need to rouse our hearts in excitement and rage on."

"How can that be acceptable! Stop talking nonsense!"

Godou could not stop himself from shouting gruffly.

To this goddess of wisdom perhaps it would come as a surprise or be regarded as desecration.

"Anyway, I don't want to hear such a wish. Choose a new one!"

"Nay, those words cannot be taken back."

Athena coldly rejected Godou's refusal.

"As a god-slayer, thou art still an immature brat who hath hardly lived as a Devil King. As a result, one had hoped to wait until the fruit ripeneth. One wanted to rely on this immortal life, patiently waiting for the proper time of harvest. However, the leisure for that, no longer existeth..."

The goddess' appearance remained the same, that of a beautiful young girl's.

However, that beauty was certainly like a great serpent standing before its prey. Staring with serpentine eyes, baring snake fangs hidden deep within those red lips. Violent and ferocious as a snake!

Noticing Athena's fighting spirit, Godou secretly trembled in fright.

"So, dost not hold back and fight. Tonight shall be our final duel ."

"Damn it, no other way..."

Faced with Athena's fierce advances, Godou made his decision.

Battle was unavoidable. In that case he must come up with a plan to handle it. He must find a way to minimize human casualties and property damage. He must stay as far away as possible from city streets, and contain the goddess with all his power. Though he could not be certain if that was possible, that was the only way —

"Hmph, those are irrelevant concerns, god-slayer."

But suddenly, Athena whispered softly to Godou as he racked his brains.

Cold as a snake, but also with a slightly disappointed tone of voice. She was like a senior looking at a junior from far above, worrying about his immaturity, hoping he would show dramatic improvement and growth.

"A hero destined to become a fierce tiger, but merely a tiger's cub right now. Thou mayst carry a warrior's instinct, but a warrior's mettle is still lacking by far."

Godou gradually became intrigued.

Why? Why did she change her tone of voice after those fierce words earlier?

"Fu— In that case, one shall mercifully do thee a favor once more. Forgetst the request for now. Kusanagi Godou shall be shown his foolishness!"

The goddess bore a fearless smile, and turned to leave.

In the direction she had come from. Step by step, she walked away from Godou.

"To prepare the proper stage for our unfavorable destiny. When the time cometh, thou shalt display thy mettle to this goddess. Only then shalt thou be worthy of bargaining with one!"

So she means she will be back?

Listening to those words of farewell, Godou stared blankly at Athena's departure.

"She's gone, Your Majesty. That was the one who came to Tokyo earlier in spring this year..."

"Ah yes. The great snake goddess..."

Godou replied hoarsely to Ena who had kept a stance ready to draw her sword.

Without a doubt, that was Heretic Athena.

However, something did not feel right. Godou could only feel there was something, but could not express into words...

Part 5

With the passage of night, it was now Saturday.

Godou and friends stayed at a nearby hotel arranged by Amakasu.

Athena's reappearance had been reported. Both Liliana and Yuri, who had faced the ancient goddess before, paled as soon as they heard the news. Amakasu scratched his head as if extremely troubled.

"In case something happens, we need to prepare countermeasures..."

In a rare moment, even the elegant Kaoru was musing solemnly for once.

Anyway, their original purpose here was to safeguard the Heavenly Reverse Halberd.

The excavation had completed around daybreak. Hearing that the work had completed while they were sleeping, Godou and his group went to take a look as soon as they finished breakfast.

The solitary torii stood near the Kisarazu shore.

The massive digging operation undertaken for "a certain object" buried beneath it.

Over the course of many days, the underground barrier was carefully removed as the heavy machinery continued to dig from the surface.

After 8am, Godou arrived at the excavation site.

"I have some mundane business to handle, so I'll leave Amakasu-san in charge for the remaining proceedings."

Having said that, Kaoru left for Tokyo.

Most likely to make all sorts of preparations in light of Athena's reappearance.

The remaining members of the team, Yuri, Liliana, Ena and Amakasu accompanied Godou to the site.

The excavation site had already been sealed off by tape. Around ten-odd local policemen were standing on guard, making it seem like some sort of murder crime scene.

"These are real policemen here, but the majority of them are affiliated with us. If you count the ones who are not visible right now, there are even more of them."

Amakasu casually explained.

With that, Godou and his group were like criminal investigators entering a crime scene for inspection.

"...This is the Heavenly Reverse Halberd?"

The "object" dug up that morning had been placed on a blue plastic sheet.

On first glance it appeared to be a very ordinary stick. Roughly the length and thickness of a pencil.

The material was unidentified, with a beige color like carefully varnished timber. It felt very solid to the touch, though not as hard as stone, but much harder than plastic.

"Last night, Mariya Yuri and I tried to investigate this object while it was still being excavated."

Liliana reported.

"There is no doubt that it is a divine artifact. Just like the Gorgoneion you were entrusted with last time. The object you see is only its surface, but hidden within it is the crystallization of divine wisdom and power, a symbol of the immortal and indestructible."

It was going to turn into a conflict with gods again.

Godou concluded with certainty as Liliana continued.

"Had it been made of the essence of the earth like the Heraion, then there would be the possibility of destroying it before it becomes the object of contention. However, this type of divine artifact is indestructible. Very likely, even a [Heretic God] would not be able to fully destroy it."

"That's why it was buried underground, and secretly guarded..."

Godou sighed.

Things would be so much easier if it could be destroyed...

"Fortunately, spirit vision about the Heavenly Reverse Halberd had been received."

It was Yuri's turn to report.

"This is likely a divine artifact related to earth and rock. I can sense the power of Izanagi no Mikoto[16] and Izanami no Mikoto[17] used to give rise to the primordial sea and Yamato[18] country."

"...Izanagi and Izanami?"

"Yes. The legendary gods who created the land of Yamato and founded the country."

This was the extent of Yuri and Lilana's findings.

Godou examined the Heavenly Reverse Halberd once again. What should he do with this thing? It did not feel safe to carry around personally, but there was no other way. Besides, it happened to be the size of a pencil —

"I'll just keep it in my shirt pocket for now."

"Even though this is a treasure that can shake the world, but I guess it's an appropriate measure. I can't think of anywhere safer than the bosom of Kusanagi-san."

Godou felt rather sad that he could not bring himself to openly disagree with Amakasu's inauspicious comment.

He pocketed the divine artifact. Had it been a lucky charm for traffic safety, it would probably be treated differently.

"Actually, I tried reaching grampsy just now."

Ena suddenly spoke up.

Ena's grampsy — the Old One, namely, the ancient god Susanoo who lived in the Netherworld.

"Ena was hoping to get some information about this halberd-thing, but it didn't work. The 'sound' should have been transmitted to the other side, but there was complete silence with no response."

As the guardian of the Hime-Miko of the Sword, Susanoo and Ena had always kept in contact by cellphone.

But this time, he was apparently playing the dirty trick of pretending to be away(?).

"It feels like he doesn't want to give directions..."

As Godou grumbled, Ena took out her Japanese sword and pushed the sword guard with her thumb, loosening it from its sheath.

This was the preparatory posture for unsheathing a sword. The stance known as "koiguchi wo kiru."[19]

"White... Goddess. No, it is something else?"

Yuri was whispering softly, her eyes focused somewhere in the distant sky.

Something that the others could not see. She must be seeing something through spirit vision.

"I get it. A visitor is approaching..."

A cellphone began to vibrate. Amakasu slowly drew out his phone and responded to someone who seemed to be a friend.

"Kusanagi Godou, be on guard."

Godou nodded to acknowledge Liliana's warning and prepared his stance.

—In the next instant, a young girl suddenly manifested. At the location in the sky where Yuri had been staring.

With brilliant blonde hair styled into curls, her dream-like beauty was like an antique western doll made by a master craftsman. She wore a black dress that was reminiscent of funeral attire.

A young beauty twelve-years-old or so whose every aspect left a deep impression.

"Greetings for the first time, Kusanagi Godou-sama."

An adorable voice as exquisite as gemstones.

A god —she was not. But she could not possibly be anyone ordinary.

What was she? Despite looking human, she could not be categorized as human. Godou stared at the ominous young beauty.

"Pray forgive me for directly addressing by name Your Highness, the god-slaying [King]. My name is Guinevere, and I have appeared here to inform Your Highness of certain matters."

Godou frowned at the elegant choice of words that did not match the young girl's appearance.

"If it's just to listen to a few words, I don't mind. But I am a stingy person who doesn't go around with ready gifts for sudden visitors. Is that okay?"

"Of course, Your Highness."

Guinevere ignored Godou's cold reception and smiled glamorously.

This must be the person Lu Yinghua mentioned. It was just intuition, but should not be too far from the truth.

"I've heard about you before. You're the companion of that woman deeply involved with the Nikkou incident, right?"

"You are correct. Indeed, Guinevere is a Divine Ancestor as Asherah's kin."

Her expressions, manner of speaking, motions.

Everything felt full of pretense, like some kind of superficial layer drawn on top.

A Divine Ancestor —an existence completely unlike the gods. Godou had heard that they were former goddesses, but Guinevere was acknowledging humans other than Godou. And also, she was nonchalantly keeping tabs on them.

"My purpose here today is to offer a plan to Kusanagi Godou-sama."

The blonde Divine Ancestor smiled elegantly as she spoke.

"Plan?"

"Yes. Guinevere already found out. As Your Highness' mortal enemy, the goddess Athena has once again appeared in this island country. As long as they are nearby, gods and god-slayers will mutually attract, encounter, face off and slaughter one another."

Calmly explaining like a little bird singing a song.

Guinevere continued speaking softly with a melodic voice.

"Your Highness and Athena's duel is inevitable. I have a plan that will prove effective when the time comes, if only Your Highness will hear it."

"Something effective in a battle with a god?"

It sounded as trustworthy as stock market tips guaranteeing massive profits.

"Hohoho. Suspicious? As befits the young but experienced warrior! But please rest assured, Guinevere is providing a countermeasure that only takes effect in a battle with Athena!"

"...Hey, that's you, right?"

Ena addressed the witch in a soft voice as if casually humming a song.

"You are the one who was watching Ena and the others as we stood on guard. There's a kind of similar feeling. You must be aiming for the Heavenly Reverse Halberd, right?"

Godou nodded, aware of the sharp senses of the Hime-Miko of the Sword.

For this Guinevere to appear now, it could not possibly be unrelated to the unearthed divine artifact.

"Yes. Indeed, Guinevere certainly wants that sacred treasure — it is hoped that Your Highness would offer up that unique divine artifact!"

Admitting to her crimes, the Divine Ancestor began to approach .

Walking towards Kusanagi Godou. Taking leisurely footsteps like a girl strolling on a plain blooming with flowers.

"When Your Highness encounters Athena once more, and my plan works successfully, would Your Highness be so kind as to grant Guinevere's wish? I do hope to obtain Your Highness' consent."

It felt like a joking request full of pretense.

Of course Godou was going to ignore it. Everyone else felt the same way.

Ena drew her sword and Liliana summoned Il Maestro. The two girls stepped forward, blocking Guinevere's path. However, some spell must have been used—

The Divine Ancestor's dress-clad body moved past the swordsmen and came before Godou like the wind.

Was the Heavenly Reverse Halberd the target? Godou went on full alert.

He was not confident he could defend if she used that ability again and aimed for his pocket. Godou took out the divine artifact and tossed it to Amakasu waiting on the side.

What a competent ninja. He caught the artifact splendidly and put it away in his bosom.

In the instant when Godou was readying his stance.

"Hohoho, Your Highness is full of openings as rumored."

Guinevere approached with quick light steps.

It did not seem very fast, but she closed the distance just like that, before Godou could mount any defense.

The witch drew her lips close to Godou's face.

And kissed him.

"On the other hand, this kind of generous leniency can be considered proof of a [King]'s magnanimity. A brilliant genius who is not concerned with such trivial things! Guinevere has great hopes for you, Kusanagi-sama!"

Was it instruction magic? Knowledge was flowing in through the mouths pressed together.

No, that was not all there was to it. There was more feeling to it like some sort of secret know-how.

—What is the Holy Grail? The sacred treasure that absorbs the essence of the earth and stores incomparable magical power. In order to unlock its functions, these are the required procedures, knowledge, sensitivities, incantations, rituals, magic...

Rather than simply transferring knowledge, this spell taught [Magic] on a much higher level!

By the time Godou realized this, Guinevere had already separated her lips from him.

"I beseech you to vanquish Athena and add new victories to your repertoire. The [Spell of the Holy Grail] will be the trump card for this purpose. Till we meet again!"

Bidding farewell, the blonde witch disappeared.

As suddenly as she had appeared, she vanished instantly like mist.

The witch Guinevere had left the excavation site, leaving behind this magic of unknown purpose.

"What on earth is she planning?"

"Her goal seemed to be transmitting knowledge to Godou-san..."

Yuri came to Godou's side as he puzzled over what happened.

"Do you feel a headache or some kind of mental instability?"

"Nothing, I don't feel especially different."

Godou assured Yuri who was worried.

In truth, a Campione's magic resistance and vitality were extraordinary. Extremely resilient. Disregarding the authorities of gods and devil kings, the chances of receiving serious injuries from enemy magic was exceptionally low.

Indeed, Divine Ancestors did not have magical power on par with Campiones.

Godou understood concretely with his own body. However, Yuri was watching him with sorrowful eyes.

"What's wrong, Mariya? I'm completely fine."

"No... The witch was very right. Godou-san really does have too many openings, it is slightly disappointing..."

Yuri spoke with great worry.

"D-Disappointing? Why?"

"Even if she was not an ordinary person, for a female to steal your lips in the first encounter, it is certainly extraordinary. Godou-san must be deliberately opening yourself up to those kinds of advances..."

Yuri's appearance displayed a kind of dream-like beauty as she mournfully voiced her concerns in a soft voice.

The mood was completely like a disheartened wife complaining about a husband who frequently spends the night with a lover instead of returning home...

Was this the feeling commonly known as lying on a bed of nails ?

Godou found it impossible to bear. In the past he might have felt less of a burden when sternly reproached by her. But as their relationship deepened, the sense of guilty conscience seemed to be weighing heavier—

Furthermore, even Liliana was joining in the fray.

"I see now. Precisely due to the existence of such openings, anyone skillful enough can take advantage of them and intrude successfully. Mariya Yuri's diatribe has substantial implications."

"—!?"

The exceptionally loyal knight was now glaring at Godou with eyes of reproach.

"In addition, the incident just now has reminded me of something else. What did you do last night when you were alone with Seishuuin Ena? No, I have no intention of reproach. Nevertheless, even as the housekeeper I did not receive any report afterwards... I believe this type of carelessness is related to the ' openings' pointed out just now. If that is the case, then correction is imperative."

No intention of reproach.

Liliana said those words as she stared at Godou with eyes of reproach.

Both the incident just now and last night as well!? It would be best not to make too much of a fuss here.

Greatly troubled, Godou could not help but signal to Ena with his eyes, hoping for her to lend a helping hand. However, the Hime-Miko of the Sword smiled shyly instead.

"Hmm. Even though Ena has all sorts of opinions on what happened just now, last night was very fun and enjoyable, spending time with Your Majesty with just the two of us. I can't help it, sorry for not saying anything until now."

An answer like that. Wasn't that simply pouring oil on the fire?

Clutching his head in his arms, Godou found unexpected aid.

Wisely ignoring this pandemonium all this time, Amakasu suddenly picked up a call on his cellphone.

"...Yes, yes. Finally appeared, eh? The location is Kawasaki... Near Ukishima. Is that right, already fallen to the enemy? Still in motion? Towards Chiba after all? I see. From the Ukishima Interchange towards the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway tunnel? Hmm, in that case there's not much time left..."

Godou and the rest fell silent. Amakasu soon finished the call.

"I regret to bring bad news. Athena has finally appeared in public. Just like last time, she has released all her powers and is heading straight towards this place."

Thus ended the report.

Chapter 4 - Petrified Metropolis

Part 1

Having bid Kusanagi Godou goodbye last night, Athena had crossed the sea.

The beauty of the night was being polluted by the presence of streetlights. Gazing at the scenery from the opposite shore, she suddenly had this notion.

The battle was finally about to begin.

Conquering enemy cities, setting them ablaze, using them as signal fires to declare war was part of the elegant traditions of the battlefield. Now then, what should be chosen as the sacrifices —

While Athena waited for early morning to appear before her, humans were slowly spreading throughout the harbor. Moored at this place were massive ships as well as little boats that seemed like they would be blown away by the slightest wind.

There were castles and towers where the noisy population entered and left. There were also quite a few mansions.

Of course, there were many human inhabitants. Far exceeding a thousand, easily in the realm of tens of thousands.

These people were living their lives, crammed in a little corner like that.

Those boxes with wheels were very conspicuous, running around making noise everywhere.

Like grains of sands overflowing in a desert. Clumsy tools created for traversing the earth's surface. Using strange artificial rocks to cover the ground, for the sake of their own convenience, these humans constructed roads everywhere as they pleased.

Athena lamented. All aspects of human beings were completely impossible to understand, what stupidity—

Like beasts seeking food for survival, only pitiful death awaited those who failed to defeat their enemies. Or plants, growing across the wilderness, enduring wind and rain, absorbing sunlight, stoically accepting all sorts of hardship, suffering, and blessings to survive. Death took its course naturally.

—That should be the way. One shall release one's authority to bring silence.

Athena unsealed the [Serpent's Evil Gaze].

The curse that transformed everything within sight into cold hard stone. The power to bring forth temporary death.

It had been used slightly in the previous battle against Kusanagi Godou. Now it was time to liberate it completely.

To the goddess, this was a casual decision akin to a human deciding what to eat for dinner that night. But to the world, the effects were momentous.

"Hohoho... This shall do. Now, Kusanagi Godou shall finally appreciate one's exalted spirit."

All sorts of stones began to roll before Athena.

Stone ships, stone roads, stone towers, stone fortresses.

There were also many man-made artificial stones that were used as building materials. But thanks to Athena's blessing, all had turned into natural rock.

Of course, these humans were also—

Gathering in this harbor, all humans had been turned into stone .

Even grass and trees were petrified. In short, everything within sight had become stone without exception.

All the boxes running around had also transformed into stone. With a single glare from the snake goddess, they all stopped instantly, becoming motionless stone boxes.

Overlooking this silent dominion, Athena was satisfied.

"Heavens, Earth, Fire, Water. One's immature destined rival. Knowest Athena's valor, thou shalt do well to know Athena's power. Preparest thyself well for one's onslaught and polishest thy sword!"

With bold declarations, she started walking.

Everything shall proceed in this manner. Everything turned into stone as one awaited Kusanagi Godou's arrival. That foolish god-slayer should then be able to realize the goddess' will to fight. If he was so set in his foolish ways that he fails to understand, one would have no choice but to give up and simply execute him without bestowing any honor or praise.

Taking quick light steps, Athena walked forth.

In the same situation, Lancelot du Lac would have charged straight into the enemy camp in the form of tempestuous lightning .

But for Athena — that did not befit the style of the queen who once ruled over the ancient divine realm.

Openly strolling into the enemy's city, displaying valor and might.

"Preparest thyself, god-slayer. This day shall be the anniversary of thy death!"

"In short, Athena is recklessly acting as she pleases."

It was at the Heavenly Reverse Halberd's excavation site near the Kisarazu shore.

Amakasu had spread out a map, and was explaining the situation.

"Almost an hour ago, Athena appeared on Kawasaki's reclaimed land and started to petrify things recklessly and arbitrarily. Although that area contains mostly factories and warehouses, nevertheless, it's completely lost. Reports say that the harbor and the parks, ships and cars, humans, animals and plants, everything was turned into stone in little more than ten minutes."

Amakasu sighed at this point.

"As a divine power after all, the petrification ability doesn't just affect individual objects. Let alone everything within line of sight, even things within several kilometers along the direction of her gaze will all turn into stone. This has surpassed RPG boss level enemies, and is more along the likes of wide-scale map weapons in simulation RPGs."

Even though it was a frivolous analogy, the wisecrack was not enough to lighten the mood.

"Next, Athena began moving towards the Ukishima junction, entering the tunnel of the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway. The tunnel interior and the vehicles have all been petrified."

Amakasu explained, pointing to the map. Taking the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway from Kawasaki's Ukishimamachi, it was just a straight road from Kanagawa to Chiba. As expected of Athena, she seemed to have figured out the geography before making her move.

"Why is this the only thing that she researches seriously..."

"Even though she is walking here with leisurely strides, she is still a goddess. The speed is abnormal. According to reconnaissance reports, she is moving at 20km/h."

Amakasu explained further in response to Godou's comment.

Normal humans with healthy legs generally walked at 5km/h or so. In comparison, it was really fast.

"The Committee and Kaoru-san have already informed all involved parties. The surroundings have been sealed off, traffic has been restricted, and movement through Haneda Airport has been stopped. The remaining problems are the cars driving along the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway and the parking area of the Umihotaru artificial island."

"If that's the case, let's confront her there."

Godou declared swiftly.

Everyone — Amakasu, Liliana, Yuri and Ena focused their gaze on Godou.

"I don't know if it's lucky or what, but it's near the artificial island of Umihotaru which we passed by yesterday. Will that be fine?"

"Of course. Leave it to me."

Liliana turned around in response to the last question.

A place they had been to before. That meant it could be reached by a witch's flight magic. The knight nodded to consent to the suggestion.

"We shouldn't have to wait until Athena reaches Kisarazu, right ? If we confront her along the way, we can prevent further losses."

Depicted on the map was the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway toll route. Godou explained as he pointed to the parking area on the Umihotaru artificial island where they had made a short rest stop yesterday. Using Liliana's flight magic as an emergency means of transport should allow them to confront Athena there.

"Right now we still don't know how to save the people on Umihotaru or the ones in the vehicles moving away from the Kisarazu direction. But we'll try our best."

"Thanks. I still have other tasks to oversee and assign, so I won't be coming along..."

As expected of Amakasu, he was already used to situations like this.

After quickly summarizing the plans, he took out the Heavenly Reverse Halberd from his shirt.

"I am returning this. Please take it."

"But will it really be fine for Godou-san to safeguard it under such conditions? In a battle against Athena..."

Yuri questioned in an elegant tone of voice.

"If a divine artifact of this sort clashes with Athena's divinity, what if some disastrous effect resulted... Ah, of course I am only speculating without any basis. But somehow it worries me and I could not help but voice my concerns."

Hearing Yuri's reminder, Amakasu and Godou looked at each other.

If the most adept spirit vision user had "worries," how could they simply ignore them?

"If that's the case, why not have Amakasu-san continue holding on to it? Since Amakasu-san is a ninja, if that witch comes along you can always find a way to escape?"

Ena made her suggestion.

"Ena and Liliana-san, as well as that young master of Hong Kong's Lu family. None of us would be able to defeat Amakasu-san in a game of hide-and-seek. Other than His Majesty, aren't you the best candidate to keep it safe?"

"Eh, is that so?"

"Yes, even Kaoru-san says that Amakasu-san would be what's called a master ninja in modern times."

"Please don't call me something like master thief or master samurai!"

Godou stared at Amakasu who seemed quite disgusted.

Perhaps he was even more suited to holding onto the divine artifact?

Ena and Liliana were already as agile as monkeys or swallows. Amakasu not only surpassed them in those types of techniques but matched Lu Yinghua who excelled at long distance travel and thievery. Godou himself had zero confidence that he could run away from any one of those people mentioned.

"Well, it only applies if the opponent is human. I'm dead if I run into a god, or the various authorities of the Campiones. And that Divine Ancestor lady is something more than human but less than divine, isn't the situation rather delicate here!?"

"Well well. Divine Ancestors can't compare to us, it'll be fine."

Not performing jobs that exceeded the compensation of his salary.

Amakasu, who often repeated that line, was feeling extremely anxious. Nevertheless, Godou brushed him off indifferently.

If there was no problem in ability, then the only issue was a sense of duty. It felt like Amakasu was just grumbling and sighing as he complained. Probably.

"Hmm... If I find myself really in a bind, I will be trying my hardest to flee to Kusanagi-san's location, okay? My salary doesn't include any hazard pay, you know."

In the end, the Heavenly Reverse Halberd was entrusted to the ninja despite his mournful declaration.

With that, it was finally time for the battle with Athena.

"Then let's go, Kusanagi Godou. Another battle against Athena awaits — I shall, no, we shall assist you with all our power."

Godou nodded silently in reply to Liliana's softly spoken words .

The members heading for the battlefield gathered around the silver-haired knight. Godou and Mariya Yuri, as well as Seishuuin Ena — The group was surrounded by blue light as they flew into the sky.

Part 2

After flying for slightly more than ten minutes, the spectacular artificial island of Umihotaru entered into view.

The Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway was a wide multi-laned toll route. As a parking and rest stop area, Umihotaru also became a tourist attraction.

Its appearance was like a massive ocean liner floating on the sea .

The first level was a spacious multipurpose plaza with a memorial hall. The second and third levels were parking lots. The fourth level contained the observation deck as well as rows of restaurants and entertainment facilities.

Liliana's flight magic gave off bright light as they flew through the air. Normally, the sight of such brightness making a landing would have caused a commotion.

But that worry was irrelevant now. Godou and his companions landed on the multipurpose space.

A cursory glance did not find anyone. The situation could be surmised from the announcer's broadcast:

'All guests, please follow directions. We have just been notified that a large amount of explosives was set up in this facility, and the police has issued an evacuation request. We hope everyone can follow our staff's directions and evacuate as quickly as possible —'

A female employee's recorded voice.

It sounded like she was reading with great nervousness. The stiff-toned announcement continued repeating on a loop.

By now, all the people present should have gathered in the parking area and sent in turn towards the direction of Kisarazu. Since all the people had arrived by car, the flow was probably easier to direct compared to other kinds of facilities.

"Amakasu-san already mentioned the countermeasures at the scene, right?"

Godou nodded.

Working in all sorts of capacities, the History Compilation Committee succeeded in sealing off all traffic from the Umihotaru artificial island to the Kawasaki Ukishima junction. Apparently, everyone had been redirected towards Kisarazu for safety. Even from the air just now, Godou and his group could see the cars lining up from Umihotaru to escape towards Kisarazu.

"I remember there's an observation deck on the top level."

Liliana suddenly spoke.

"Should we stay on guard and watch the Kawasaki direction from there? We should be prepared for Athena's arrival from a place with good visibility."

"Good idea. Ena has great vision, so anything strange should be spotted immediately."

"Right... Even though my spirit vision has nothing to do with normal vision, it should be easier to sense Athena's divine aura from a wide open space."

The two Hime-Miko expressed agreement. There was no reason to reject the proposal. Godou answered immediately.

"Got it. Then let's follow that plan."

"Understood. Oh... Seishuuin Ena and Mariya Yuri should go up there first to stand on guard. Kusanagi Godou and I will check out the situation at the parking area before joining you two."

Liliana gave orders efficiently.

The silver-haired blue knight was being more proactive in delegating tasks compared to before. Perhaps it was due to the absence of the one usually in charge of coordinating the group — Erica? Or maybe it was due to her new role as Grand Chamberlain ? Probably both.

"Okay. Then Yuri, let's go."

"Very well. If we spot anything unusual, we will immediately let you two know by phone."

Yuri and Ena did not object to Liliana's leadership.

I see. Godou found it interesting. In stark contrast with the Italian duo, the Hime-Miko pair displayed a weaker sense of cohesion. As a result, the red and blue knights naturally took up the role of Godou's second-in-command in turn.

The two Hime-Miko took the massive escalator up to the top floor.

As their figures vanished, Liliana immediately grumbled.

"...Finally, just the two of us."

"...Eh?"

Liliana shyly lowered her gaze, her face gone completely red —

She seemed emotionally unstable and muttering something under her breath.

"Actually, while we were flying I had been wondering how to find some private time for us. This went unexpectedly well, excellent."

"W-What is this about?"

Liliana spoke softly as she approached, causing Godou to ask in a trembling voice. Actually, the current developments were making him realize "Could it be *that*!?"

"Please do not pretend to be ignorant, okay? You are the one more obsessed with 'victory' than anyone. You could not have failed to consider preparing your weapon before the battle with Athena."

She was certainly right. Knowledge gained from instruction magic only remained in his mind for about a day or so.

Godou had long forgotten the knowledge of Athena he once had.

"If no one offers knowledge to you, then Verethragna's [Sword] cannot be formed. In short, that is the situation. Kusanagi Godou."

"W-What situation!?"

Wait a minute. In truth, he already had a basic idea as soon as Liliana's beautiful face drew near.

But it was very problematic to treat "that sort of thing" as if it was the most natural thing in the world. It was the root cause of why he was labeled a sex maniac by society. On the other hand, not having a reliable weapon would be a huge handicap...

Godou was struggling with all sorts of concerns.

"I believe someone needs to accomplish this mission. So let me, Liliana Kranjcar, do the job. Though I sometimes wonder if I am abusing my authority as housekeeper when I assume this duty, nevertheless, I still do not want to relinquish it to other girls —"

The knight's expression remained stern and awe-inspiring as always.

There were many faces to this knight. Sometimes she was exceptionally adorable. On other occasions she might be trying to clean up personal disasters with a frantic expression. Other times, she would display a fairy-like beauty of complete vulnerability.

Currently, she was very apprehensive from a lack of self confidence.

"I believe you should prioritize the one waiting by your side, always ready when you need me... However, umm, if you ever feel like entrusting this duty to another, of course I shall immediately step down and dismiss myself... I humbly beseech your permission ."

She looked very unsure as she spoke.

She probably had little confidence that Godou would pick her. At this moment, she lacked her usual domineering attitude, and displayed an extremely adorable side to Godou. This rare expression from Liliana greatly stimulated Godou's sense of protective desire.

More praiseworthy above all was her determination to go this far in spite of her embarrassment.

With that thought he instantly stole Liliana's lips.

"Ah..."

"I must fight Athena afterwards. So please, I rely on you."

Godou briefly whispered as their lips came together again.

Tears welled up in Liliana's eyes as she nodded.

"Yes, very well. I will tell you everything to know about that goddess. Because... Because you must obtain victory."

Again, Godou passionately pressed his lips against the whispering knight's lips.

Lips were released and came together time and again. Tongues and saliva tangled and mixed together, becoming one. Throughout the process, knowledge and feelings were transmitted.

Indeed, Godou had received bonds of magic and intense emotions.

They were a little more than ten minutes late by the time they caught up to the two Hime-Miko.

After frantically concluding the ritual, Godou and Liliana went up onto the observation deck. The two Hime-Miko who got there first immediately greeted them.

"Ah, you finally came. So slow."

"Were there any problems down there?"

The artificial island of Umihotaru was located in the very center of Tokyo Bay.

This observation deck on the fifth floor was surrounded by sea on all sides. Far into the distance, the streets and shores of the two prefectures Kanagawa and Chiba could be seen.

The view was excellent. This was even a well-known viewing spot for night scenery.

Ena and Yuri were currently gazing at the road from Kawasaki. This was the path Athena was expected to arrive from.

"Umm, as feared, it seems like not everyone has evacuated."

"T-That is most correct. In order to protect them we have to put our best effort. Let us do our best!"

Godou and Liliana responded vaguely to the Hime-Miko's questions.

Still, they had gone to properly check the state of evacuation. Taking the escalator up from a certain level of the parking area, the situation below could be easily surveyed.

There were roughly twenty or thirty vehicles remaining.

Even though Umihotaru was a tourist destination, there seemed to be relatively fewer visitors than usual. Perhaps it was fortunate that it was still early —before ten in the morning.

"...Isn't there something weird about His Majesty and Liliana-san?"

"...I think you are right. They are both acting unnatural and look kind of unsettled?"

It was because the two had done something together in secret. Godou and Liliana pretended to be calm and avoided answering.

"Ah! Now that it is mentioned... Perhaps... Could it be... I knew it!"

"What is it, Yuri? You realized something?"

"Y-Yes. *T-That*. Those two must have... Yes, definitely without a doubt."

Yuri was suddenly shocked by a certain realization.

It was not clear whether it was the result of spirit vision or a woman's intuition... She began whispering into the baffled Ena's ear.

"Then that means the chance for earning credit has been stolen from Ena and you!? How could that happen, it's so mean!"

"W-With respect to a battle with Athena, this is a necessary step after all. Please do not say something so presumptuous. B-But still — Godou-san!"

Yuri appeared to be rationally persuading her outraged friend, as well as herself.

But clearly trying hard to bear her emotions, Yuri suddenly shouted at Godou.

"Learning knowledge about Athena, eh? Doing it with Liliana-san and trying to hide it from us both."

"Umm... Umm, well."

"M-Mariya Yuri. J-Just as you said yourself, this is a necessary ritual for the battle."

"Liliana-san, please be quiet. I am speaking with Godou-san right now."

Interrogating Godou who had given a vague answer earlier.

Stopping Liliana from explaining, and sending her silent immediately .

Somehow Yuri had become the center of the situation. It was unbelievable. She was the extremely conservative type who always tried to keep out of the spotlight. However, she also had times when she would suddenly display great power and influence over her surroundings.

"Regarding that matter, nothing more needs to be said. I also believe, that it was necessary in preparation for the severe battle ahead. I too, shall put forth my best effort to support."

"Uh yeah."

Even though she was calm, Yuri's words were extremely terrifying.

Godou could not help but stand up straight. The fact that he was about to answer "Yes" very respectfully was a secret.

"By the way, last night's little tryst with Ena-san is the same. You seem to engage repeatedly in such behavior while trying to hide it from others? Do not forget Your Highness is the one known as [King]. In my humble opinion, your words and behavior should properly display a king's dignity and splendor."

"S-Splendor?"

"Yes. Indeed you are equivalent to a tyrant who continually commits acts of atrocity and willfulness. By the moral standards of

ordinary society, you would probably be described as outrageously indulged in debauchery. Nevertheless, I still know that you are an honest person with heroic ideals."

Having spoken thus, Yuri suddenly smiled in a dreamlike manner.

"I believe this is the reason why I love and admire you, and offer my assistance. Furthermore, I also believe you will never commit acts of cowardice... Yes, even along the demonic path towards hell, you will walk your own path with open righteousness."

Godou could not stand things any further.

She was describing him like a *kabuki*[20] performer "indulged in one's own art."

Yuri was acting like a principal wife married from a highborn family? Faced with the husband's philandering, she generously offered forgiveness "because it is natural for performers." A wise and virtuous wife who firmly grasped the husband's reins —

"I humbly advise you to show a little restraint in behavior that taints your honor. Keeping silent for such reasons is most inappropriate... Now then, is everything prepared in regards to Athena?"

The pressure disappeared all of a sudden.

Yuri was back to being a gentle and refined high class young lady. Resuming her gentle expression caused the mood to lighten immediately. Whenever she lectured in the past, her imposing presence was already extraordinary... But now it was apparent she had made great progress in both the gentle and the forceful.

(...Hikari also indicated complete helplessness at resisting her elder sister.)

Godou observed to himself. Perhaps everyone had grown and matured, having been through so many hellish trials.

Yuri. Liliana. Even Erica was much different compared to their first encounter. Compared to before, Ena was also entering human society more frequently.

I too, must be strong —it was time to remind himself.

Feeling battle strength rising from his energy center beneath the navel, Godou began to feel a sense of excitement.

She arrived? Godou cast his gaze towards Kawasaki.

There was not a single car on the multi-laned highway. This must be the result of the goddess entering the tunnel section of the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway and petrifying all vehicles and passengers along the way.

Athena's beautiful appearance came into view.

Openly advancing, she seemed like she was casually strolling on an empty plain.

Nevertheless, she was moving at exceptional speeds. Even if a human ran as hard as possible with reckless abandon, they would be instantly left in the dust.

This was another of Athena and Kusanagi Godou's numerous reunions.

Part 3

"Fu— all said and done, thy face looketh mighty spirited compared to last night. But 'tis insufficient. Completely insufficient ."

Athena asserted suddenly.

Even though she was in the form of a young girl, her frowning expression was one which belonged to a haughty queen.

"Thy expression and thy heart, both lack the determination of a warrior prepared for death on the battlefield. As a god-slaying warrior, thou art ludicrous."

"Shut up. Stop imposing your Iron Age style of thinking on modern humans!"

Godou retorted at the goddess standing on the road beneath.

That unbridgeable gap in culture. From the current standoff, it was clearly the reason why Godou could never build a good rapport with Athena.

"Regardless, I can't believe you went to such lengths. If you cause trouble to human society, then I can't remain silent. I will do everything I can to drive you out of this country."

"Even if thou sayst that, 'tis not enough."

God and god-slayer. The gulf between them was far too wide.

Athena looked up at Godou from the road. Godou looked down at Athena from the observation deck.

"Drive out? Fool! Why canst thou utter words like slaughter and wipe from the face of the earth!? In the face of such a crisis, hast thou not learnt the determination of a warrior!?"

"I have my own ways of doing things! Whether you are a goddess or a queen, you have no right to complain!"

The physical distance between them was nothing.

There was a consensus between the two. What separated them was the distance known as issouku-ittou no ma[21] — the battle could begin any moment by taking a step forward. That was the situation.

Godou gestured to the girls, giving an order of "stay back."

Liliana, Yuri and Ena immediately obeyed and retreated to the depths of the observation deck, preparing for changes in the battle situation. That was their assigned mission.

"By the skills with which I wield spell words, may justice of the world manifest!"

"Bearers of lingering life, all shall cease activity completely! Ye shall be vanquished here!"

Chanting spell words at the same time, Godou used the [Warrior] incarnation while Athena unleashed the divine power of [Petrification].

"A cold tombstone that befits ye. That shall be this goddess' blessing bestowed!"

The snake goddess' song brought forth temporary death.

A change started from under her feet. She had been standing on a road constructed from thick concrete.

However, the man-made road instantly changed in appearance. Becoming a rocky plain covered by natural gray stone. No, not only that — even the ocean was turned into stone.

All the waves on the surface of the surrounding waters of the Umihotaru artificial island had been frozen into stone.

Liquid seawater had been turned into solid rock. Athena had petrified all the seawater within a two or three kilometer radius around her.

"Now then, sleep. Simply wait to awaken at dream's end. However, one shall imprison ye in an eternal dream!"

How ridiculous! This meant defeat was not an option!

Godou began to chant the spell words of the [Sword]. In order to create the blade of knowledge that could sever Athena's divinity .

"As the one who holds all victory in my hands, I am the strongest. The mighty and the indomitable one!"

Godou was standing atop Umihotaru's observation deck.

The god-slaying weapons appeared over his head in the form of spheres of light.

They were like thousands of stars hovering in the night sky. One by one, the bright spots of light sliced through Athena's divinity, paring away at her divine power.

"I shall vanquish all evil-doers!"

Godou first used the [Sword]'s spell words to surround the entire artificial island of Umihotaru.

This parking rest stop area had now become a ship in distress, floating on a sea of stone. Probably hundreds of people were unable to seek refuge within the ship? That included Godou himself, Yuri, Liliana and Ena. Furthermore, quite a fair number of cars must have been in mid-route, driving towards Kisarazu.

Athena's [Evil Gaze] prohibited them from reaching their destination.

With unshakable willpower, Godou began controlling the [Sword]. The divine power of petrification from the goddess' eyes began to be cut, severed, slashed, and pierced by the blades of light surrounding Umihotaru.

It truly was defense as solid as rock. Godou's [Sword] had turned the artificial island of Umihotaru into a fortress.

"Hohoho. Thou art too careless, Kusanagi Godou."

Athena began to smile.

Her lips shaped themselves into an instigating smile, full of mockery.

"Thy [Sword]... Verethragna's god-slaying blade. One hath seen it once already. Dost thou believe one would not prepare a counter , knowing one shall face it again!?"

"What did you say...!?"

"Hohoho. Thou shouldst know, the Greek legends of one's [Aegis]. Having slew Medusa, Perseus offered her head as a gift to Goddess Athena. Athena afixed Medusa's head onto her shield to become the [Aegis]."

Godou recalled the sculpture of Goddess Athena.

In Greek sculptures, she was often depicted bearing a shield. That shield was engraved with a design bearing the snake-haired monster Medusa's likeness. It was said to protect Athena using its magical power to turn everything into stone.

"For the sake of countering thy [Sword], one hath imitated the classic story of the [Aegis]. Indeed, Medusa was one of the many names of this goddess. Having retrieved the Gorgoneion, one's many names had been reunited once more."

Godou saw it —

Standing behind Athena, another Athena manifested.

He had seen her before. It was the goddess' teenaged appearance when she matured from her pubescent form.

Pubescent Athena. And mature Athena as an eighteen-year-old maiden.

Both goddesses were appearing in splendor at the same time!

" "Only at this moment, have the goddesses been separated once more." "

" "Namely, Athena and Medusa. Medusa and Athena. Kusanagi Godou, thou hast severed the divinity of Athena, but what shalt thou do about Medusa?" "

The two goddesses spoke together softly in perfect unison.

—Oh no! Godou instinctively knew what was about to happen.

In the past, Godou had also done similar things himself. Changing the [Sword]'s target during battle. This strategy was a direct counter to it. Athena was intentionally splitting apart her divinity!

" "One is Athena, Goddess representing Darkness. Master of the Underworld as Queen of the Night." "

" "One is Medusa, Goddess blessing the Land. Master of the Stone Chamber as Queen of the Earth." "

" "As such, humbly acceptest the curse bestowed by this goddess. Kindly turnst into an ice-cold corpse and layst thyself in the Underworld." "

" "As such, humbly acceptest the blessing bestowed by this goddess. Kindly turnst into an ice-cold statue and returnst thyself to ash and dust." "

The spell words from the two goddesses attacked Umihotaru.

Athena's [Death]. The grim reaper's curse that dragged everyone towards the afterlife.

The use of such a contemptible power greatly infuriated Godou. A way must be found to deal with it. Accelerating the [Sword], he completely slashed apart the pulse of [Death].

However, the evil gaze of Medusa's [Petrification] could not be eliminated. No way to defend, no way to counter!

The entire interior and facilities of Umihotaru directly below him were completely petrified.

Kusanagi Godou was not going to fall to this petrification. Even though it was a divine authority, as long as he made use of the power flowing throughout his body, a Campione's body was able to endure.

But what about everything else?

Amongst them were other living things, vehicles, machinery, plant life, as well as his companions.

With no way to resist.

"Mariya! Liliana! Seishuuin!"

Godou yelled. He yelled as hard as he could. However, before his eyes, Mariya had been turned into a beautiful stone sculpture.

Liliana had also turned into a fairy-like stone sculpture.

But there was one sole exception.

"Your Majesty, please! That one —to use as Ena's power —!"

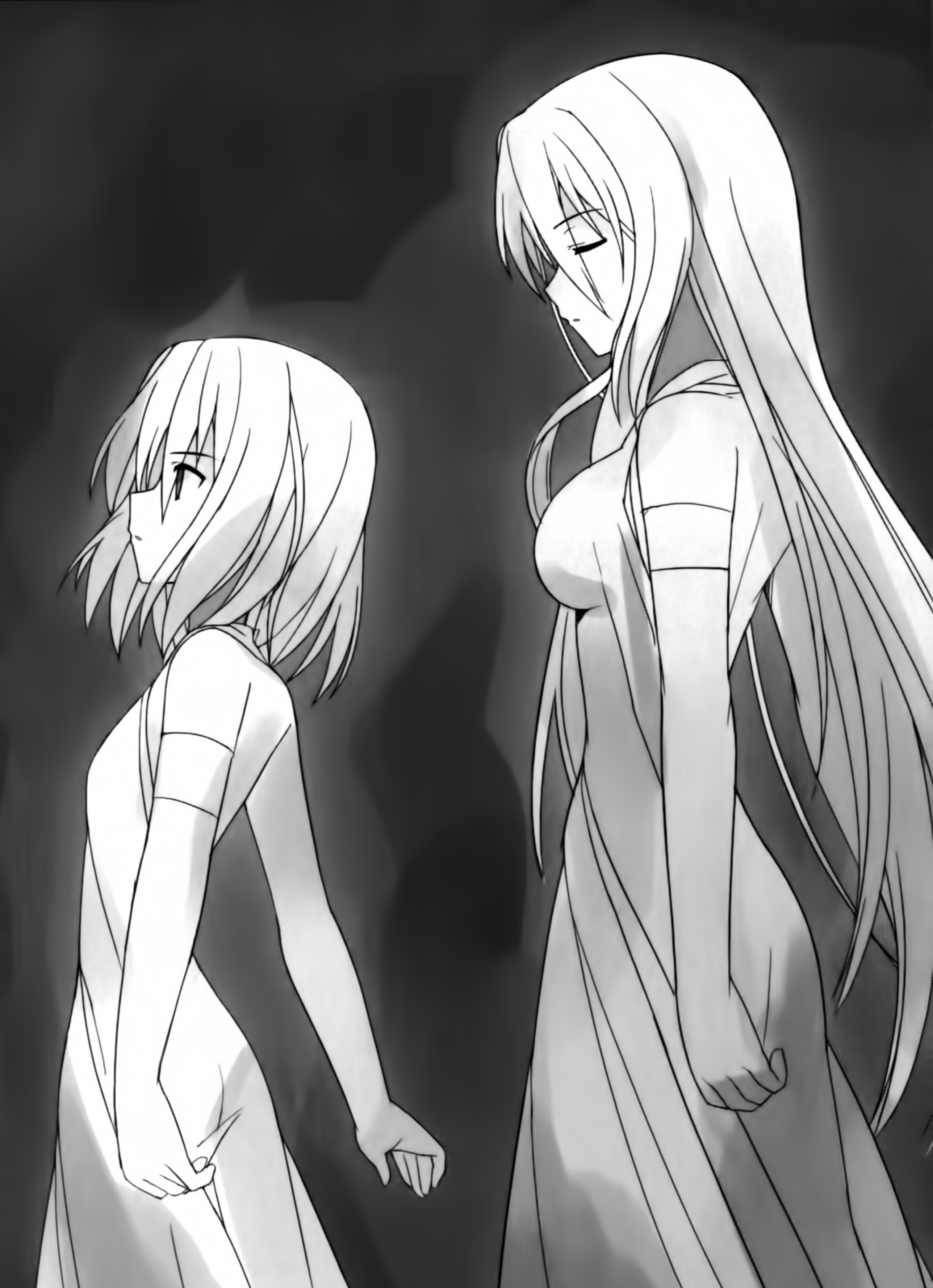
In the instant she was turning into stone, Seishuuin Ena shouted and reached out with her hand.

Towards Godou. Seeking what Godou possessed, her partner.

"Please, Ama no Murakumo! Go protect Seishuuin!"

Godou ordered the divine sword dwelling in his arm. To reach her in time no matter what.

The one-meter-long sword manifested in Ena's hand. Its blade was black as the darkest night. This was the divine Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi that appeared in the form of a sword.



As Godou's partner, the sword was entrusted to its other partner.

Divine possession — the act of bringing down divine might upon one's body, was an ultimate skill that only Ena could use.

"I shall swing this divine blade like the wind! My body shall be one with the divine metal of destruction!"

Instantly promoted to a superhuman existence, the Hime-Miko swung Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi.

The jet-black blade captured the goddess Medusa's petrification pulse, absorbing its power, thereby protecting the wielder's body.

"Damn it, it doesn't help the others!"

"Ah, thou lookest plenty more spirited than before, Kusanagi Godou!"

The beautiful goddess pounced upon Godou as he gnashed his teeth. From the road far below, she made a great leap and flew like a bird, reaching the observation deck in a single bound.

"Thy courageous pupils burn with fury and vengeance. Now that is a true warrior, forsooth!"

Athena and Medusa were reunited as one again.

The pubescent girl and the teenager had merged into an eighteen or nineteen-year-old maiden.

Savagely attacking Godou in this form, she slashed with her hand repeatedly. Athena's slender hand was deadly as a lance wielded by a death knight.

"Gwah —ah!"

Godou screamed as the flank of his abdomen was sharply sliced open.

Flesh severed, innards ruptured, blood spewed forth. This was on the level of incised injuries caused by bladed weapons.

Against such an avatar, the [Sword] was no longer effective. Godou immediately switched to the [Camel] incarnation, counterattacking Athena with a sweeping kick!

"Hohoho. Very well, one's blood boileth, burning inexhaustibly!"

Jumping to evade the kick, the goddess bore a fearless and terrible smile.

With absolute fury, Godou glared severely at that beautiful face.

Part 4

Verethragna's fourth incarnation, the [Camel].

Using this incarnation required severe injuries beyond a certain level.

In return, it conferred bestial combat abilities, kicking power to send gods flying, resilient endurance to pain, and exceptional healing.

Godou felt the pain on his flank subsiding as he prepared to continue the battle.

"Thou hast been hiding such a power! As expected from the authority usurped from the warlord of the everchanging forms, how marvelous, a sight to behold!"

Athena guffawed as she began swinging the giant scythe she had summoned to use as a close combat weapon.

Swinging the scythe with both hands, the sight was reminiscent of the grim reaper's signature weapon. The blade was black as the darkest night.

Relying on the [Camel]'s gifts, Godou evaded successfully.

Verethragna's fourth incarnation, the [Camel].

Such combat skills were beyond human ability. Rather, these skills were swift as a savage beast, controlling his perceptive body, striking out with kicking attacks.

Kicks that could shatter stone. Nevertheless, Athena managed to block using the jet-black scythe's shaft.

Was it successful due to being a god's supernatural weapon, or was it due to Athena's own divine skills? Struck by the [Camel]'s kick, the wooden shaft did not shatter but absorbed the impact instead.

"Damn it, didn't work, huh —!"

Godou endured the pain in his flank as he desperately engaged in close quarter combat.

Evading Athena's swinging scythe, counterattacking with kicks, avoiding her counters with beast-like movements, attacking in return.

Godou had no knowledge of martial arts.

But a Campione's warrior instincts told him, the [Camel] was ridiculously strong. Even someone extremely talented as Lu Yinghua would be knocked out in one hit. It could gain the upper hand over Doni, and even fight Luo Cuilian to a standstill. That was how it was.

Perseus was the same. And now Athena too.

Their martial arts could be considered the human pinnacle by default.

Few geniuses could reach that divine realm even if they endured pain and suffering, madly training themselves until they coughed out blood. Because the level of the divine was completely ridiculous.

Rather, one should express the highest praise towards Doni and the sworn elder sister who managed to match gods with their human bodies.

"Nevertheless, Kusanagi Godou."

The goddess swung her scythe with absolute might. Even Verethragna's [Camel] could not completely stand up to it. Cuts and incisions multiplied across Godou's body, bleeding away.

As a result, Athena calmly declared:

"Didst thou think that one would compete with thee like a human? Using mighty authorities to vanquish foes, now that is the way of one's kind!"

"—!"

Godou trembled. If that was case, he might not last.

He had rushed in for a battle of close combat because the [Camel] was only suited to an exchange of physical blows.

That was how he managed to maintain an even battle. However , if magic was mixed into it —

"O Shadow, submergest."

Athena softly spoke the spell words.

Behind her, a black shadow was squirming like a snake.

"Becomest fangs that tear iron apart, makest haste!"

At the same time, Athena slashed with her scythe from the side!

"Danger, Your Majesty!"

Ena instantly squeezed her way in between.

Ka! The Hime-Miko of the Sword blocked Athena's scythe using Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi while Godou desperately lurched sideways to escape the black fangs.

"...Miko? Dost thou intend to intrude our sacred territory as a lowly wench?"

The first time —

Athena glanced at Seishuuin Ena for the first time.

She entered the goddess' view for the first time. However, there was no acknowledgement.

"Desperately throwing thy human life away, merely relying on divine grace, this pittance of power cannot compare to one's kind. Knowest thy place."

"Even if it's a god's orders... Ena will not listen!"

Ena raised Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi before her.

She had apparently been waiting for an opportunity to intervene.

"Kusanagi Godou is my husband! Seishuuin Ena has decided to guard him with her life. Even though I know you are the queen of the Mediterranean — Ena will not back down!"

Muttering softly, the Hime-Miko's body was brimming with Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi's divine power.

Divine possession. Even on a very small scale, it was a mystic technique that conferred divine might.

"How's that, Your Majesty? Ena can fight by your side. Surely I will prove my worth!"

"Ah yes. I definitely can't win this goddess by myself. Thanks."

Godou immediately answered affirmatively.

Humans who could fight alongside Campiones were virtually nonexistent.

In previous battles against gods, everyone had been providing support from the back. The only exception was probably Erica when she was under Verethragna's protection. However, what about Ena under divine possession—

"By the blessing of bows and arrows, bestow honor upon this great sword!"

Ena chanted spell words and raised her beloved sword up high.

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi. The jet-black blade slowly began to curve. This was a technique for increasing slashing power .

The heretic divine sword that vanquished foreign invaders since ancient times.

"Sing of death, guide death, dance to death — Become Athena's servant, the underworld messengers of death!"

Athena also chanted a song of disaster in turn. Behind her, the black snake resumed its posture.

There was not only one. Their heads, shaped like scythe blades, rose one after another.

Two, three, four — a total of nine snakes finally manifested behind Athena's back. Their bodies were long, reaching 10m or so in length.

These black snakes extended from Athena's back like the petals of a carnivorous flower, writhing as they moved.

And then the battle resumed. While the goddess advanced, brandishing her other weapon, the iconic grim reaper's scythe, the nine black snakes also attacked together.

Baring their fangs, lifting their scythe-shaped heads, seeming as if they would devour everyone on earth.

"Seishuuin! Don't attack recklessly, let's establish a solid defense first!"

"Got it! This situation is becoming really bad."

Keenly aware of Godou's voice, Ena instantly replied.

As befitted the Hime-Miko of the Sword, she understood his intentions from a simple instruction.

Since Athena was holding the upper hand, the correct approach would be to endure the crisis patiently, waiting for the opportunity to reverse the tide of battle to their favor!

Godou and Ena cooperated, coordinating with each other to face the goddess.

Shoulder to shoulder at times, back to back on other occasions —

The [Camel] defended by kicking away Athena's scythe.

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi slashed apart the gaping jaws of the black snakes.

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi deflected Athena's scythe.

Godou used the [Camel] to send a black snake flying with a kick from his heel.

Even though their teamwork was improvised, they coordinated extraordinarily well.

Ena did not try to show off and single-mindedly served as a " shield." Whenever Godou faced an attack he could not handle alone and showed an opening, the divine sword went to the rescue .

Other than that, it was essentially a defensive battle.

Avoiding overextending themselves to attack Athena. They did not attack but only took measures relevant for containment.

Ena probably knew very well. Even with divine possession she could not face Athena in a direct confrontation. But acting as a " shield" was perfectly within her power.

I see — Godou could not help but realize.

Ena was different from Erica who was skilled in weaponry, or Liliana who always paid close attention to details.

She instinctively understood differences in combat potential between friend and foe, battle situations, and what measures should be taken, thereby taking action boldly. This was not conspicuous intelligence but a natural instinct for victory.

That was Seishuuin Ena's disposition.

Having a similar disposition was likely one of the contributing factors to Kusanagi Godou slaying a god. She was a companion

with similar sensitivities. In that case, they could likely succeed in producing amazing teamwork.

"Glorious I am, victorious I am, Ahura[22] grants creation unto me. Chasing foes as they flee, striking down enemies from the front. Chant my name for the incantation of victory!"

The tactic of retreating to a temporary defensive formation, then attack and counterattack.

Godou chanted Verethragna's scripture to raise his magical power. In order to take back initiative and give Athena a critical blow.

The [White Stallion] would be the most suitable. In their previous battle, the avatar of fire had been the decisive move that secured victory.

But that too, had been defended last time. Without sufficient preparation, using it could waste his biggest trump card. Because Verethragna's ten incarnations became unavailable for a full day after each use.

'Come! Now is the time to make use of the Holy Grail. Please freely vanquish Athena!'

Godou stared wide in surprise.

He could vaguely hear Guinevere's voice — or rather, sense it.

"Fu! Thou art quite a resilient man! Excellent, Kusanagi Godou. Let one's authority smasheth apart the fortress thou hast constructed! Miko who knoweth not her place, if thou fearest divine punishment then begone from this place!"

Athena called out loudly.

Without their noticing, the battlefield had shifted outside Umihotaru.

Due to the snake goddess' curse, the ocean had been petrified. Standing on waves that originally offered no foothold, Godou and Ena, as well as Athena were engaged in battle.

All three of them possessed supernatural agility. Thanks to leg strength granted by the [Camel], Godou was able to jump almost 10m without any running start.

Leaping around as they battled, they had made their way to this location on the sea.

"Now one composeth the song of winter. All plants shall wither, fruit shall fall from trees, petals shall scatter. Thus heralds the season of death and darkness!"

Athena's spell words resounded across the petrified sea.

Ena rubbed Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi against the ground and held it in a preparatory stance. This divine sword had the ability to absorb and tear apart all sorts of spells and spirit powers.

No matter what authority the goddess used, all shall be cleaved for the sake of Godou's protection —

This determination of hers was readily apparent. Nevertheless, will she be successful?

A terrifying coldness was emanating from Athena's body. Just the act of standing near her was chilling to the bone. It was the freezing temperature of permafrost.

She was the queen of darkness and the underworld. The grim reaper of grim reapers who disseminated winter and death.

Was Seishuuin Ena capable of subduing such a power with her mortal body? Could Godou, who was not omnipotent, defend against it?

"As the one who holds all victory in my hands, I am the strongest. Man and devil — all enemies, all who harbor enmity will be vanquished!"

But still, it had to be done no matter what — !

Steeling his determination, Godou raised his magical power at this time.

'In past days, the White Goddess created a vessel. Sacred amongst the earth mother goddesses, immortality, wisdom, all were poured forth into it. Hence the Holy Grail was born...'

The voice of Guinevere could definitely be heard.

It was not a transmitted sound but a voice that came from within Godou, a voice from the heart.

'The artifact known as the Holy Grail, is the vessel for absorbing life force from the earth mother goddesses. Sometimes from the carcasses of dead earth mother goddesses, other times from living goddesses, the Holy Grail devours their life for nourishment...'

This was the spell taught in the earlier encounter.

The [Spell of the Holy Grail] mentioned by Guinevere, was this it?

'Just by performing a few procedures, no earth mother goddess can escape the Holy Grail. Furthermore, this sacred treasure currently lies dormant within Athena...'

What? Godou stared at Athena in surprise.

The goddess of darkness was intending to fully unleash her authority. It could be felt clearly. Perhaps due to activating the [Spell of the Holy Grail], her actions could be discerned with clarity .

Swallowed within the body of the beautiful goddess, the object resembling an urn — that must be the Holy Grail!

How should that divine artifact be revived? It was highly probable that Athena would attempt countermeasures. All this was clear to Godou.

His mind pondered freely about how he could use that artifact to swing the battle in his favor.

Why would that kind of object be inside Athena?

Why did Guinevere tell him how to use it?

These questions of doubt swirled into a vortex. However.

The sight of Yuri and Liliana, turned into beautiful statues, surfaced in his mind. If he did not defeat Athena here they could not be saved. Ena would likely be sacrificed too.

—Victory must be obtained. For the sake of saving everyone, Athena must be defeated!

Fighting spirit dispelled all doubts. Godou yelled out at Ena who answered readily.

"I'll sweat the small stuff later! We must end things here. Seishuuin, give me that thing!"

"Understood, it's ready!"

Seeing Godou rush towards Athena, Ena immediately understood.

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi. She handed her beloved sword to Godou.

Godou grabbed the Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi he had lent out and continued running. The goddess was single-mindedly raising her divine power. It was like the instant before a dam's rupture.

The nine snakes behind her tried to bite Godou at the same time .

Godou made a forward thrust with Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi.

The divine sword, also known as the "Kusanagi Sword," started moving autonomously, tearing through the black snakes. Watching from the back, Ena was moving her partner through her thoughts.

"O Messenger of winter! Extendest thy icy-cold hands, and stealest the the warmth of life!"

In that very instant, Athena also chanted spell words, unleashing her authority.

A violent blizzard began to blow with the goddess at its center.

It was not just a blizzard. It was wild and riotous wind blowing from the underworld, bringing temperatures colder than ground-level permafrost.

Magical wind that froze everything completely on contact, shattering them directly. This gust of cold air could very well be equivalent to absolute zero temperature.

Even the exceptionally resilient Campione would not be able to withstand it.

"Regrets of the White Queen, become my power now!"

Godou yelled out the spell words without hesitation.

This was the incantation for awakening the Holy Grail. The magical words for absorbing a mother earth goddess' life force.

"—!? What, wherefore art thou using this!?"

In the middle of releasing a blizzard, Athena was surprised.

Her whole body began shining with golden light.

It was like the faint light of dying fireflies on a midsummer's eve. It came from the sacred urn buried deep within Athena — the Holy Grail.

A demonic icy blizzard was violently blowing, piling a snowy plain upon the plain of rock.

At the same time, the golden brightness was rising vertically straight up. It was like an upright pillar of light.

"Ancient Grail, now is the climax of the battle! Knowest thy place!"

Athena commanded the pillar of light that rose into the clouds.

She had to divert her attention to suppress the Holy Grail's action. If this light continued to shine, Athena's life force would be rapidly drained.

The height of the pillar of light shrank by half, but this also meant her attention was diverted away from controlling the blizzard.

"Please, Seishuuin! Ama no Murakumo!"

Godou swiftly called out.

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi had the ability to absorb spells and spirit powers, tearing them apart.

It was likely ineffective when Athena was at full power. However, aiming at Athena whose concentration had been disrupted by the sudden crisis, a mere window of ten-odd seconds , the blizzard was sliced apart.

Ena responded appropriately to Godou's orders.

Standing from behind and directing Ama no Murakumo with her thoughts, Athena's divine power was severed.

"W-What—?"

Athena was shocked. Successfully cutting apart the blizzard offered some slight respite.

Godou let go of the divine sword and jumped using the [Camel] 's leg strength. Leaping high into the air, he unleashed a

descending kick. It was like a shooting star flying down from the heavens —

A full powered kick from up high, it ended up striking Athena in her left shoulder!

"Ooh —!?"

Godou could feel from beneath his foot the shattering of the goddess' shoulder.

Struck by this attack, Athena began spinning like a top and was sent flying. She must have sustained a fair amount of injury. With that, the tide of battle should have turned back to Godou's favor!

Determined, Godou made a stance.

The light emitted from Athena's body had almost vanished. The Holy Grail must have been suppressed once again. In the parlance of sumo wrestling, this was Nekodamashi.[23]

Simply sleight of hand. Godou did not believe the same tactic could work again.

Suddenly, Athena's body began to give off light again.

Rising up high as if bursting through the heavens. Such forcefulness dwarfed the sight just now.

What on earth was happening?

As Godou watched in shock, the radiating brilliance had illuminated the petrified plains of the sea and Umihotaru with a golden color.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH —!"

Athena screamed out in pain.

Part 5

In terms of human history, the following story happened far in the past.

It must have been over five hundred years since the man known as the Messiah had died.

In the land now called Europe, there existed a number of Devil Kings.

Those who had slain god and usurped divine authority. The violent god-slaying warriors whose hearts were consumed by battle. From the perspective of humanity, having just one of these monsters appearing in an era was a miracle.

But this was a rare moment in history.

An apocalyptic era when several of these rare characters had appeared, vying for domination.

All sorts of incredible people were drawn to these Devil Kings. They worshiped the [Kings], hoping to serve them.

A certain [King] commanded equestrian tribes, incessantly invading the territory of other nations.

A certain [King] was a pure berserker. He was surrounded by ferocious barbaric tribes who admired him and became his followers.

A certain [King] was completely devoted to researching magic, hoping to rule over the demonic magi, priests and astrologers who inhabited the filthy alleyways of the imperial capital, Rome.

A certain [King] could not be bothered with such things, choosing instead to wander between nations, displaying mindless valor.

Last of all, a certain [King] had turned the island of Britain into his own hunting grounds.

The island was in a state of chaos at the time. Though the Roman Empire originally ruled this land, they had abandoned it, leaving it to internal strife and constant invasion from neighboring barbarians.

Legends told of the island's [King] who was a suzerain Roman general.

Tasked with guarding Britain from barbarian invasions, he was sent there accompanied by a few troops.

Arriving at the land of his new post, he slew a god and became a Devil King —

Whenever outsiders invaded the island, he would immediately intercept and defeat them. But he never slaughtered his enemies completely, thus allowing them to encroach again. Whenever internal rebellions occurred, he suppressed them immediately. But always, he permitted the mastermind to escape, thus sowing the seeds for new rebellions.

Well, that was basically how things repeated time and again.

The god-slaying [King] loved hunting more than anything, and his favorite prey were living humans. For the sake of this hobby, all he cared about was indulging in his pleasure of the hunt on the lands of Britain.

As a result, ancient Britain was an apocalyptic world. The end of an era.

While the common people were ravaged by incessant warfare, *He* appeared.

He challenged the hunt-loving [King] and obtained victory.

A hero indeed. A brave warrior indeed.

The people of Britain worshiped him, calling him "Artos."

Furthermore, the other [Kings] on the continent began to direct their attentions towards the hero who had slain a Devil King. The

appearance of a worthy foe. Perhaps, if one could murder him with one's own hands...

This was the beginning of a series of death matches, not recorded in any history book.

Eventually, the name of "Artos" was slightly altered in pronunciation to become "Arthur," thus leaving a trail in history and legends.

King who manifests at the end of eras, he was the master of the Witch Queen Guinevere.

"Guinevere originates from a goddess who fought alongside Master and Sir Knight. However, Guinevere no longer retains memories of those times, and can only learn about Master's great accomplishments through records of the past."

A young blonde beauty was standing on a beach in the Far East.

Naturally, this was Divine Ancestor Guinevere.

"Hmm. However, after a long and difficult search, you — or rather, it was your previous incarnation who finally found Master's avatar, the divine sword — discovered those remains."

Standing by Guinevere's side, the knight spoke solemnly.

Lancelot du Lac.

Clad in beautiful white armor, the knight's face was hidden by the helmet's lowered visor. He held a lance in his hand.

The ancient sword Excalibur which had awakened and was reborn as a divine lance.

"Furthermore, as the present generation's Guinevere, you have gradually advanced towards the sacred grounds where Master sleeps. Look!"

Lancelot pointed at the sea surface with the tip of the lance.

This island kingdom of the Far East had engendered all sorts of myths, mysteries and legends. Standing on the beach, the white war god pointed at the sea before him. The sight was as brilliant as the sun rising over the sea's horizon.

The light from the Holy Grail's absorption of the earth mother goddess' life force could be seen.

"The young god-slayer fell into your trap and awakened the Holy Grail held by Athena. Of course, she will suppress it once again."

"Yes. But before that happens, Guinevere will finish the task properly!"

Staring at the golden light, she began to summon magical power.

"Graal of legend, I beseech you to let me hear your voice. The daughter of the White Goddess ignites seven candlesticks. Recall your past glory."

The image surfacing in her mind was directly converted into magical energy.

Guinevere wielded magic naturally. Those known as Divine Ancestors, were temptresses who were able to use magic as freely as their own limbs.

By the time the spell was complete, the golden light was already quite faint.

Initially it had been tall enough to reach the clouds, like a pillar of light. But now, the beam of light was gradually weakening, and almost could not be seen from this beach. Nevertheless, there was still enough time.

Before Athena completely suppressed the Grail, Guinevere seized the opportunity to ascertain the Holy Grail's existence.

"O White Goddess. As the descendant of your divine self, this girl beseeches you. Bestow upon the sacred cup and the Divine Sword of Salvation, the link that connects these two vessels once again!"

The "pathway" which connected the life-absorbing Holy Grail to the planet-slicing divine sword.

Through this invisible "pathway," the life force absorbed from Athena by the Holy Grail was being infused into the divine lance Excalibur held in Lancelot's hand.

Athena's body must now be emitting many times more light than before.

"Hmm. With that, the divine blade can be swung without any hesitation."

Lancelot pointed the the lance tip towards the heavens.

The platinum-colored blade flashed with a radiant luster.

"Yes. In order to connect the Holy Grail with the divine sword, Kusanagi-sama's power was used. Things went smoothly as planned, how reassuring."

The young Campione had only managed to awaken the Holy Grail for a brief period.

Seizing that disruption, affirming the Grail's existence and immediately connecting it to Excalibur. This was a mystical technique only the Witch Queen could perform. A superlative divine skill.

"Hoo... Now it is clear that your decision was correct."

Lancelot said reassuringly to the one under his protection.

Were he not wearing a helmet, a smile would likely be seen on the war god's face.

"Since these are the ones who can slay this Knight's kin, the gods, then no scruples will be spared to make use of all weapons to assure victory... Phrasing it that way should be acceptable, right ?"

"Yes, it is true. After all, as a god-slayer, he is a bastard child of the fool Epimetheus!"

Guinevere remarked with derision.

However, her young and beautiful face was trembling from fear .

"But then again, the very fact that they are fools is why they pose unforeseeable threats to our plans, becoming formidable foes. What a group of shocking people!"

Lancelot listened to the beloved child's sighs as they walked along the beach.

Waiting ahead was the white divine horse. It was the divine beast that served him, the friend who galloped with him across battlefields.

"Girl, as a heretic this Knight does not know how much more time can be spent by your side. However, before the day we part, this Knight swears to lead you to Master's side!"

The inevitable farewell.

This was exactly Guinevere and Lancelot's worry.

Deviating from their proper divine depiction in the myths, whether due to confusion, insanity or obsession, [Heretic Gods] were imprisoned on earth.

The war god had given up being the Witch Queen's guardian for the sake of liberating all his power.

It was still fine for now. Lancelot had become Guinevere's guardian through bonds forged over a millennium. Nevertheless, there will come a day when he will be devoured by the distortions of being a [Heretic God], thus beginning a wayward path, leaving the beloved child behind.

Regardless, Lancelot mounted his beloved horse, and began galloping through the air.

"O Ancient steel, become this Knight's strength. Let one become the blade that sweeps away the saplings of riotous commotion!"

Spell words were chanted in midair to awaken the divine blade.

The essence of the earth powered this sword. The purer the better the effects.

For obvious reasons, a vast fertile plain would be filled with greater quantities of essence compared to a barren desert. However, the most ideal source was the life force inhabiting mother earth goddesses...

"By the hero's honor, this Knight displays divine might thus!"

Excalibur's white tip produced a platinum-colored sphere of light.

It carried an exceptionally intense brilliance that was as if the sun had fallen down to earth.

This platinum sun flew across the sky.

Towards the battlefield. The arena where Goddess Athena and the young god-slayer were engaged in battle.

"Guh... Ooh —!!"

Goddess Athena was struggling in pain before Godou and Ena.

Her beautiful torso emitted golden light as she rolled about on the petrified surface of the sea.

Her upper torso was a young girl's, her usual form.

However, below the waist was a snake's body. A very long, exceptionally long serpentine body. Probably ten-odd meters in length. The tiny scales covering this snake body were silver-white in color. Having reverted into a half-human half-snake monstrous form, Athena was breathing heavily and rolling around in pain.

This unusual appearance was probably the goddess' true form. Both a beautiful girl and a great serpent at the same time.

Terrifying. A fearsome existence. But also sacred and beautiful. As an existence like that, she was currently suffering in pain. The serpentine body gave off golden light as it rolled about. Her beautiful face distorted, making pitiful and painful noises.

Athena's body shone with golden light.

At first it was as blindingly brilliant as the sun, and impossible to view straight. But soon it became quite weak and no longer forced others to divert their gazes. Nevertheless, Godou knew the Holy Grail had successfully activated inside Athena.

Due to the Holy Grail inside the mother earth goddess —

Her life was being drained in a manner like a leech's blood sucking.

Even though Athena was supposed to have an immortal body, if this continued she would weaken and die eventually.

"Ooh... Indeed, 'tis yonder maidservant who taught you the mystical arts to operate the Holy Grail."

"So you really do know that witch called Guinevere... And you're enemies with her."

Godou remarked to Athena as she moaned.

He began to reflect on the truth of the entire matter as he watched the suffering goddess.

"The enemy of my enemy is a friend... That's not right, I must have been used like a pawn."

"Fu... Didst thou not use yonder maidservant's spell to vanquish this goddess? Thou soundst as if thou wert also deceived...!"

A fearless smile appeared on the beautiful face of half-human half-snake Athena.

Then she stopped the thrashing of the serpentine body. The lower torso, covered in silver-white scales, slowly shortened and transformed. It became human — a girl's legs.

Athena had regained the form of a young and beautiful girl.

"'Tis not bad. Assaulting an enemy's weakness with merciless slaughter. 'Tis the warrior's way. Thou hast made slight progress, the matter shall not be pursued..."

Even though tormented by pain, the goddess showed a calm and composed smile.

This must be Athena exhibiting her will and spirit as she restored her snake torso back to human form. Precisely because she was in a desperate situation, she did not want any pity as a goddess.

"However, as long as one's life remaineth unextinguished, one shall fight till the very end. Kusanagi Godou! This goddess bestows upon thee the honor of dueling with Athena in her desperate state!"

"Enough! I don't plan on fighting in such circumstances!"

Godou yelled at the scythe-wielding Athena who was repeating her usual lines.

"You seem to be under various effects today. Look at your body! If you can't continue fighting, then settle down!"

If things continued, even immortal Athena would meet her end. It was only natural to persuade her to surrender.

However, if she refused to stop fighting then she must be defeated. This goddess in the form of a young girl, had under fate's mysterious guidance, encountered Godou many times.

There were no fair and certain methods of victory. Guinevere's true intentions were also a concern.

However, setting these issues aside, it was imperative to defeat Athena. If the goddess rampaged further in this situation, let alone Kisarazu, the entire Kantou region could become petrified.

What should be done? Should he do it? Must he do it like that?

Athena swung her giant scythe mightily as Godou hesitated. In that very instant —

"Your Majesty, danger! Look up. It's — very dangerous!"

Ena cried out. Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi laid ready in his hand all along.

Godou was shocked by the sight in the sky. A flying sphere of light, shining with platinum brilliance, was approaching. The brightness was like a star crashing down upon the earth's surface.

"Divine Sword of Salvation! Must thou cut one down here, too impatient for this goddess' death!"

As soon as Athena spoke, it immediately happened.

From the shining platinum-colored star, a beam of light attacked the petrified ocean surface.

Slicing it apart in one broad stroke. With only a single attack, a deep trench was carved out of the petrified ocean surface. Roughly ten-odd meters in length, and likely similar in depth.

What kind of slashing attack was this! Similar to Verethragna's [Sword], it was a weapon controlled by gods.

They had to get away from that star!

"You run away first, Seishuuin! I will follow!"

"Yes. Take care!"

The Hime-Miko of the Sword ran swiftly like the wind.

Without carrying any load, her speed should allow her to escape to a safe place.

However, Godou could not. Rather, there was this lingering need. Ena had obeyed orders immediately, probably because there was no time to evaluate the decision.

On the other hand, Athena was —

She was spreading darkness around her. This was the dark protective shield she used previously to defend against Verethragna's [White Stallion] — the flames descending from the sun.

The platinum-colored star emitted bright light once more, striking down at Athena's darkness.

Surprisingly, though the dark shield managed to block the attack, it was blown away. Previously, the darkness had been able to defend against the [White Stallion]'s firepower!

...The attack was only the beginning.

The white star flashed with light once again. However, it was not only one beam this time.

Several, no, dozens of beams of light were sprayed out. Multiple layers for sure. A deadly sword formation woven from white flashing lights...!

One beam of light approached Godou's head. Fast as lightning.

However, this extreme speed in turn allowed him to activate Verethragna's seventh incarnation, the [Raptor].

Having obtained god-like speed, Godou attempted to evade the blade of light.

All said and done, god-like speed was only akin to lightning. It was not light speed.

Luckily, Godou managed to escape the beam from the white star using the limits of god-like speed. From that it would seem like it was more of a lightning attack.

There was no time to verify this random notion. Running away was imperative. Just as he prepared to do so, he saw it.

The multi-sword formation looked as if it was about to slice Athena into pieces.

The darkness protecting her were all gone. Defenseless. About to be helplessly sliced apart.

—One reaps what one sows. Godou thought.

Despite all sorts of special circumstances, she was the culprit of the current crisis. She had brought great disaster to human society. If she had not done so then she would not be in peril currently.

However, Athena's expression was clearly visible.

The courageous goddess, proudly lifted her head up high to gaze at the white star.

Had she been faced with a sentence of decapitation, she would probably show the same expression? She was the one who embraced the dignity of the ancient matriarch deity and goddess of the divine realm.

"Damn it... Why, why do you have to make that kind of expression?"

If her life was saved at this point, "battle" would inevitably recur.

It would be best to ignore her. She had turned Yuri, Liliana, and many other people into stone. Godou was furious at those acts of hers. However, it was also true that the Holy Grail-whatever was buried in her body like a bomb —

"This is really forcing me to do unnecessary things!"

Speed like lightning.

Godou fully unleashed god-like speed and charged forward. Towards the goddess.

He reached her at the final moment. As multiple swords of light flew down from the sky, he carried Athena in his arms before they could slice her apart. Like that, he continued running at full speed.

An instant later, at the spot where Godou and Athena had been. ..

The shining swords of light raged furiously. Not only did they cut up the now empty petrified ocean surface into a thousand pieces, they completely tore it up to leave no trace behind.

With that, the white star had lost its target.

But then the fallen star began to move actively once again. It tried to seek the escaped prey, like a hunter's hound slowly following its scent...

Back to the artificial island of Umihotaru, then along the connecting road towards Kisarazu.

After passing through the Kisarazu junction, he next headed for the nearby coast.

This was the route taken by Godou as he held Athena in his arms. However, the white star that had been firing swords of light was still hovering in midair.

And slowly moving towards the beach where Godou was now located!

"Even with this level of speed, it can still sense our location..."

Godou groaned.

In order to let Athena rest, he had stopped moving at god-like speed.

"'Tis only natural. This star of [Swords] released by the Divine Sword of Salvation — consumeth the earth's essence for nourishment. Furthermore, it currently maketh use of the purest essence absorbed from this goddess through the Holy Grail."

Athena remarked from beside him.

"That [Sword] moveth for the sake of capturing one's life. In that case, 'tis only natural for it to sense one's location. Because the Holy Grail hidden within this body is connected to it!"

The pristine white features of her beautiful face were more deathly pale than usual. A shadow also lay beneath her eyes.

Athena was clearly wasting away.

Despite being unable to stand, she still glared at the white star unyieldingly.

"If that's also Guinevere's item, then she must be nearby. Know where she's at?"

"...What dost thou intend, Kusanagi Godou?"

"Even though your current state is your comeuppance, I am still partially responsible. I must find Guinevere and stop that [Sword]. Although this means I must act violently, it can't be helped."

Godou explained his plan.

His heart did not hurt. That meant there was still time before the [Raptor]'s limit.

If he quickly found the location and ran over with god-like speed, then he should be able to catch that witch.

"What art thou saying? Couldst thou be wishing to save this goddess!?"

"You helped me once during that time against Perseus. If you die before I can return the favor, I'd be very troubled."

Athena shook her head at Godou as he laughed and prepared to continue explaining his plan.

"Thou art as feeble as the first day... Apparently, thou hast not learnt to discern thy own weaknesses..."

The goddess was nagging with those disapproving comments again. However, her severe expression gradually subsided.

Like grass of spring swaying gently in the breeze, Athena lightly exerted a force on her shoulder.

Her gaze, turned towards Godou, was filled with interest and curiosity as if looking at a favorite piece of treasure or artwork.

"An interesting suggestion, but alas, not very appropriate. That object cannot be stopped by such a hasty strategy."

Athena remarked as she turned her gaze to the white star.

It was no longer spraying [Swords]. Most likely because of the god-like speed exhibited by Godou. Rather than attack rashly and

be evaded, it was better to advance slowly to assure certain annihilation.

"That said, dying from the nefarious schemes of that maidservant, would be truly vexing. More than anything, more than being unable to settle our rivalry decisively, 'tis even more vexing."

"You still plan on fighting me..."

"Of course. Otherwise one would not be the goddess Athena. Be that as it may—"

A mirror suddenly manifested in the goddess' hand.

It was a small hand mirror like the ones used by women for applying makeup.

"Athena's fate looketh like it shall be blemished. One had intended to wait for this long life to reach its end in a manner befitting an immortal. But now one's hand is forced to employ little tricks to extend life on earth."

Athena spoke as she gazed upon the mirror.

And so the pubescent otherworldly beauty suddenly transformed into a beautiful statue. Using the mirror, she had turned the snake goddess Medusa's evil gaze upon herself!

Furthermore, the white star hovering in midair suddenly vanished as well.

—I see. Godou understood.

The curse of petrification was the power to bring forth temporary death. Athena had entered a state of false death, temporarily halting her living activity. As a result, the Holy Grail became unable to absorb life force. Thus the [Sword] also lost its power source, and could no longer be sustained.

In the end, Athena retaliated splendidly against Guinevere's conspiracy.

However, what should Kusangi Godou do? Divine Ancestor, Athena, petrified streets and facilities, petrified people, Yuri and Liliana who had already fallen —

Godou anxiously contemplated his next moves.

Chapter 5 - Where This Sword Shall Strike

Part 1

"For this incident, the scale of the affected area is extremely broad. The work required for the aftermath and information control will surely be very troublesome."

Sayanomiya Kaoru explained to Godou in her usual clear tone.

This was at a beach within Kisarazu city, the place where Athena had turned herself into a statue a few hours ago.

"In a certain sense, there's actually a very simple solution. It all depends on Kusanagi-san's will."

From the beach, there was a clear view of the ocean illuminated orange by the glow of dusk.

The young beauty's statue stood all alone in this scenery. This exquisite otherworldly beauty on her face, could not possibly be reproduced by any living artist. Furthermore, the pubescent but proudly puffed out chest displayed the goddess' haughtiness. A girl who acted this way probably did not exist either.

Godou and Kaoru were the only two people bearing witness to this beautiful statue.

The entire coastal area had already been sealed off by the History Compilation Committee, preventing ordinary people from entering.

"My will, you say?"

"Yes. We have already confirmed the identity of the deity causing all these supernatural phenomena. All we need is wait one whole day to pass, then use the [Sword]'s spell words. Take Ena for example. She, too, can teach you knowledge about Athena."

"Seishuuin?"

"I expected that sort of preparation would be necessary. A few months ago, I ordered all the Hime-Miko to study western deities. Of course, not every deity, but famous ones like Athena were included nonetheless."

Kaoru explained cheerfully. How astute of her methods.

Not only as a Hime-Miko, but as an organization leader, she also had outstanding talents as a strategist.

"Even though Athena had turned everything into stone anywhere from the reclaimed area in Ukishima across the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway to the Umihotaru artificial island. However, she did not cause any destruction, which is actually quite fortunate. So long as you use your authority, Kusanagi-san, and sever Athena's power by sweeping the [Sword] through the entire area, everything will be restored."

That's right. It was the same for objects, people, as well as animals and plants.

Including Yuri and Liliana, everything that had been petrified could be restored.

Currently the History Compilation Committee seemed to be putting all their efforts into controlling information, and were busy sealing off the affected areas.

They had already controlled all news and prohibited the media from making detailed reports. During this time, an abortive incident of toxic gas leak near Kawasaki was reported... A fabricated news source.

All sorts of methods were employed to publicize it, in preparation for covering up the ridiculous truth.

The biggest problem now faced was how to handle the families of petrified victims. No matter what, failing to return home without any communication would worry friends and family, causing them to take action.

If there was a way to resolve the incident swiftly, of course it should be taken.

Personally, Godou wanted to see Yuri and Liliana revived as soon as possible.

Nevertheless.

"Due to the current situation, I guess we need Kusanagi-san's cooperation no matter what. It would be a great help if you could agree readily. In addition to that, at the same time as saving the

victims of petrification, please slay Athena in her vulnerable stone form. If another incident could be prevented by striking at its root, then 'all will be fine.'"

Kaoru's request sent Godou into deep thought.

Right. If he took the opportunity to slay Athena then everything would be resolved.

However, Godou still stood there staring blankly. Ever since Athena had turned into a statue, he had been idling on this beach for hours.

That star which had displayed white [Swords] of terrifying power —

Godou believed that the one controlling it, Guinevere, would probably target Athena again.

This goddess who had brought great disaster to human society, even if he were to abandon her to her own devices, no one would complain, right?

Time continued to advance, and night had fallen.

Godou was still idling on the seashore accompanying Athena's statue.

He had just received a call from Amakasu, informing him that Ena was arriving later to bring something over. He must have realized Godou was agonizing over something.

However, Amakasu did not try to broach the subject.

Intending to respect a Campione's decision? Or leaving things alone because he gave up on understanding why Godou was troubled? The latter seemed more and more unlikely.

Anyway, even Godou himself could not articulate why he felt so concerned about Athena's matters.

"She... Is really about to die?"

Guinevere's subterfuge. The matter of the Holy Grail. Athena's various behaviors. After much thought, Godou reached that conclusion.

A beach in early winter. A charming statue enduring against the icy cold sea breeze.

Even though it had the appearance of an eleven or twelve-year-old girl, there was no child-like innocence in that face.

Neither powerless nor harmless. She was the queen ruling over the high heavens, the bountiful earth and the dark underworld. The exalted goddess.

With death approaching, she had forced herself to pay Godou a visit —

"Why would she do that..."

Godou could imagine, but he was uncertain if he guessed correctly. It was probably too difficult to fill the cultural divide through his lone efforts. Godou instinctively took out his cellphone .

A warrior queen from the Bronze and Iron Age civilizations. What he needed was someone whose brain was wired the same way.

"Give me a break, I can't possibly talk to that idiot!?"

Amongst all Godou's friends and acquaintances, one particular young man was clearly furthest away from modern ways of thinking.

The child blessed by heaven in the strange ways of the sword. The god-slaying knight.

Despite Godou's efforts to forget him, it was strange how that man always managed to elicit a hostile response. It always felt like irrelevant concerns. That guy was like a Viking warrior who had conformed to modern life, but he was not an appropriate conversation partner. Best to reconsider.

As a result, Godou decided to call someone else.

He made an international call to Italy. Accounting for the current time of 6pm with a time difference of eight hours, whether that person had awakened or not was a rather delicate question —

'What's going on, Godou? You finally couldn't bear the loneliness of my absence?'

Instantly connected to Erica Blandelli, Godou decided this would count as rising early for her.

However, she was speaking in a cheerful manner unlike her usual tone of voice when getting out of bed.

"Even when you're not around, I'm still very lively and not depressed at all. Don't make up strange stories."

'Of course not, it's not like I'm Lily. I was just imagining how someone might feel after losing me, an existence much like the sun .'

Godou could only laugh wryly in response to her usual confident and imposing manner.

"Let's put that aside. We have a real crisis over here."

'.....Yes. And it truly seems like a real crisis."

After a brief explanation, Erica commented with indifference.

Furthermore, she even added the following remark calmly:

'Well, whenever you feel lost, know that your heart has already made its decision. Just do as you feel. I will back you up properly once we converge later.'

"My heart has already made its decision?"

No way. Being unclear on what to do was the exact reason why he wanted to talk to someone.

But Erica carried on indifferently.

'The Kusanagi Godou I know, is a person who acts without a moment's hesitation when he wants to defeat someone. Yes, it is impossible to imagine someone who grew up in peaceful modern Japan to have such bold decisiveness.'

"I am a veritable pacifist and member of modern civilized society. Stop making these strange descriptions."

'What's wrong? I've always thought, that Godou here, is similar to those early equestrian tribes enamored with civilization. Acting civilized during times of peace but completely merciless in battle. And about to be accustomed to a vagrant life requiring great decisiveness.'

What was Erica trying to say? Godou was getting angry.

If that were true then he was just a selfish inconsiderate person. That would be a massive amendment to the character description!

'Do you need me to point out all the similarities between you and the nomadic Mongolian horde that swept through China and various nations in Europe? In that regard, I'm sure Godou you don't need any help in understanding..."

"None of your business. But really, when I feel lost my heart has already decided?"

Even though he completely ignored the criticism that refuted his claim to being a modern human, he will keep the other piece of advice in mind.

"When are you coming back?"

'It's not like I require special permission, but I won't be able to board a plane immediately. With the current situation, I do need to return to Japan as soon as possible. We will meet up first before seeing how things go from there. Before that, please fight as you see fit.'

I see. Godou nodded firmly, ending the conversation with Erica.

She could not return immediately to support him, but without any worry or uneasiness, he will wait for the return of the companion whom he could trust to watch his back.

In that case, it's really up to myself how to handle things as I see fit —

Guided by that notion, Godou's thoughts naturally fell in line. Yuri and Liliana in that state must be saved. The petrified victims all have to be rescued no matter what. And then there was Athena, if that troublesome goddess also had extenuating circumstances...

Abandoning someone for the sake of another, that was not Godou's style of doing things.

I will adhere to my own principles no matter what.

Part 2

"Sorry you had to wait, Your Majesty!"

Ena arrived on the seashore half an hour after the call to Erica had ended.

As usual, she was wearing that uniform from that school located goodness knows where, with the cloth bag slung over her shoulder carrying a Japanese sword. In addition, she had brought food contained in convenience store bags, as well as outdoor equipment such as sleeping bags.

"...You brought all sorts of things."

"I was thinking perhaps we might need to spend the night here just in case. For the moment, Amakasu-san has also arranged for lodgings nearby."

Ena lightly put down the luggage on the beach as Godou spoke with his eyes widened in surprise. Perhaps due to her martial arts training and running around in the mountains, her legs and back must be rather strong.

"I was absorbed in my thoughts and it totally did not occur to me. Thanks and sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Let's make something to eat."

Saying that, Ena immediately went to work gathering fallen twigs from nearby.

She seemed to be choosing dry twigs that were not soaked by seawater. Realizing the Hime-Miko's intentions, Godou also followed suit.

A few minutes later, Ena used a lighter to start a fire with the twigs and paper they had gathered.

Thus a campfire was ready. Due to excellent night vision, the lack of lighting did not pose any inconvenience, but it was still rather chilly. Having a fire for warmth felt really great.

"Seishuuin doesn't smoke, right?"

"Right. But lighters and matches have all kinds of convenient uses, so I always keep them on me."

True. They were tools with many uses out in the wild.

Having responded like a child of nature, Ena poured mineral water bought from the convenience store into an outdoor kettle, and started boiling the water.

Then she took out two portions of cup noodles.

She placed deep-fried tofu into the noodles in clear broth, and set out all sorts of deep-fried food.

Deep-fried pork chop sandwiches, BLT sandwiches, hotdogs and burgers. There were also various flavors of rice balls such as

salmon, tarako salted roe, kombu seaweed and plum. It seemed to be an assortment of food items appropriately selected from convenience store shelves.

"Eating outdoors like this is rather delicious."

"Yeah. Cities are so nice, so easy to collect ingredients. If this were the mountains, gathering food would be such a chore."

The two sat around the campfire and began their meal facing each other.

Since he was rather hungry, Godou didn't bother with manners and swept everything clean.

The seaweed in the cup noodles turned out to be surprisingly tasty. The taste seemed to seep slowly into the depths of his tired body. Ena was also enjoying her food with great relish.

She seemed like the type who could not resist this kind of junk food.

Godou had heard before that the daughters of the Seishuuin family were raised as high class ladies back in the village...

"I have done this before, but it seems like it's been a while since I went to the mountains."

Godou recalled going on trips with friends who loved the outdoors.

Spending time together with Ena was like having a male friend. Even though Godou had grown more or less accustomed to getting along with girls, it still felt very exhausting most of the time.

Incredibly, this child of nature did not make him feel the same way.

"Does Your Majesty like visiting the mountains? If that's the case, go with Ena. Next time Ena plans on climbing the sacred grounds of Ukokusan. It's a place where even locals do not venture for training unless they are veterans. A very tough challenge. It's gonna be fun."

"...I think our experience with 'mountains' are on completely different levels."

The invitation felt like it was no different from a one-way trip to the afterlife.

Godou smiled wryly at Ena who made her suggestion with complete carefreeness.

"If we're going, let's pick somewhere less challenging. How about a mountain more suitable to novices, that even Mariya can make her way up with effort?"

"...Yuri too?"

"Yeah. If we're going out next time, let's bring Mariya and Liliana along as well."

Godou asserted.

With those two's talents, they would not need to subsist on instant food all the time.

Perhaps they would even prepare exquisite outdoor cuisine. Well, eating so casually today turned out to be quite pleasant too. However, it would not be appropriate in situations where Yuri and Liliana were present.

They would probably say something like prohibiting this kind of unhealthy food...

Godou recalled Liliana's passionate diatribe against the evils of food additives and trans fatty acids.

"Let's rescue them tomorrow. You'll help, right? Seishuuin."

"Of course. You can rely on Ena!"

Godou began to ponder as he listened to the upbeat voice of the Hime-Miko.

He must save those two girls, as well as the others. This was already established. The remaining problem was how to clear up the whole story of the troublesome goddess. Ever since night had fallen, he had been troubled by these questions...

Godou was about to throw trash into the convenience store bag when he noticed something.

"What's that?"

There was a piece of paper in the bag.

A few words in English were written on it.

The scribbled handwriting read "Watch out. Here comes snatcher!"

"Beware of thief... Something like that? When did that get in here?"

"Sent by a spell — hmm, no, definitely not."

The Hime-Miko stared at the note as she wondered.

Now that it was mentioned, Erica had used that kind of spell before, called something like mailing. It was convenient magic that allowed one to send letters to anyone freely. Ena also sent a letter of invitation into Godou's desk once, and most likely had used the same spell.

"The sensation of a spell... Completely cannot be felt. Probably someone put it in there while Ena was traveling here. Or maybe it was placed while we were eating..."

"What?"

Godou was completely shocked.

Nevermind Kusanagi Godou, for someone to be able to elude Seishuuin Ena's senses —

Who could possibly have such abilities? For the Hime-Miko of the Sword with her beast-like sensitivity to have failed to detect anything. Truly a divine level of skill!

Ena also seemed taken aback. She stared at the note with a pouting expression.

Leaving that aside for now, what did they have to "beware" of?

Godou suddenly remembered. He had almost completely forgot that thing.

He took out his cellphone and called Amakasu. It might have been lost already.

Worried thoughts occupied Godou for minutes as he waited —

"No no. Shaking off stalkers sure is tough. Right, looks like I have a call, is something up?"

"Amakasu-san! You're okay!?"

Godou was reassured to hear Amakasu's voice just as he was worrying.

The special agent of the History Compilation Committee had suddenly appeared on the beach in his usual sloppy suit, and was walking over.

As befitted the ninja, astutely appearing and disappearing without warning.

"Could it be, that witch Guinevere showed up?"

"An excellent question, Ena-san. That presence just now really was that lady. I had to use every single spell and technique at my disposal, and ran with my life to get here."

Amakasu responded to Ena's question with a haggard face.

Then he took out the Heavenly Reverse Halberd from the pocket of his suit — the divine artifact.

"I knew it, this thing should probably stay with Kusanagi-san... I think running away from magi along the likes of Divine Ancestors is too much of a burden for me..."

"No. I'm really sorry, but I will continue relying on you for now. "

Godou was very worried and felt sorry for forcing a troublesome task on Amakasu.

However, he bowed his head.

"Didn't Mariya say before, better not let this piece of stone get near Athena? Even though it seems okay currently while she has turned into stone, but it might not last."

"...What do you mean?"

"...Your Majesty, I knew it."

Amakasu looked very surprised, but it was Ena who deduced the situation.

Godou explained assertively to the two of them, as well as to petrified Athena.

"Obviously I will save everyone who has been petrified, but I have to end things decisively with her — I don't know in what manner, but there will be a definitive conclusion for sure. Thus I was thinking, if it results in another severe disaster... My humble condolences."

The great goddess had said that her fate as Athena had been blemished.

Godou felt it was hyperbole. Be that as it may, Godou was also someone who could barely be classified as civilized. Really, just barely.

Amakasu went "oh my, things will really get hairy" and looked up at the sky, then bowed to express agreement.

Ena generously nodded with total acceptance.

Nevertheless, Godou really felt like scratching his head in revulsion at his declaration, so typical of Devil King Campiones.

"That said, how should we proceed specifically?"

It was now late at night.

Having contemplated all sorts of things, Godou muttered to himself.

"Athena's petrification can be released with my sword, but the problem is the Holy Grail..."

He was currently in a room on the second floor of a local residence along the seashore. The lodgings Amakasu had arranged . The next day will be full of trials and it was a blessing to be able to get a good night's rest.

This house was built on a spot that had offered a wide view of the coast.

If Athena made a move they would immediately be able to react . Godou's window faced the ocean. The statue of the goddess continued to stand majestically on the winter beach. Local policemen and Committee employees had already sealed off the area.

It was already decided that Godou would be alerted by cellphone if anything out of ordinary was observed.

As a side note, the entire house had been taken for the convenience of police-related personnel. There had been other families who wanted to arrange for lodgings, but they were turned away with random excuses.

The only one in this room was Kusanagi Godou.

It was already eleven o'clock at night. However, he still had no idea how to "come to a conclusion" with Athena... Without switching on the light, Godou stood at the window, continuing to contemplate.

Light shone in through the window from the moon and the stars. It was roughly as bright as streetlights. Due to Godou's excellent night vision, it was more than enough.

Kacha. The door handle turned and someone walked in.

"Still up, Your Majesty?"

It was Ena. But Godou was shocked by what she was wearing.

"What's going on, Seishuuin, why do you look like that?"

"Uh yeah. It was time to sleep so I changed."

In a rare moment, Ena was speaking hesitantly.

Instead of her usual school uniform, she was dressed as a miko with a pure white top and a bright red hakama.

Now that he recalled, he had seen Ena's miko appearance briefly during the battle against the Great Sage Equaling Heaven.

"You wear a miko outfit instead of pajamas?"

Isn't that kind of blasphemous... Godou averted his gaze as he spoke.

This caused the premier Hime-Miko to explain frantically.

"It's not always like this. But it'd be embarrassing to visit Your Majesty in dirty clothes. Without any other clothing on hand, I had no choice."

"What are you talking about? Don't you just wear the same uniform all the time?"

"Yeah... But tonight, we are having an affair."

Did he just hear alien language? What was that girl Ena trying to say?

Godou instantly denied reality. But of course, things would not be settled that easily.

"On this very special night, I was thinking I should clean up a bit first? Ah, Your Majesty, the bed has been prepared. T-Then, I will be in your care."

Ena showed a shy expression as she made a shocking statement. Furthermore, she went over to the prepared bedding and sat down very formally in seiza.[24]

"W-W-W-W-W-What kind of complete nonsense are you talking about! It makes no sense at all!"

"On the contrary."

Ena was no longer shy but bore a resolute expression. Her eyes were filled with clear determination. Bathed under moonlight, a white luster could be seen on her prim and proper beautiful face.

"Your Majesty plans on fighting Athena again tomorrow, right? Rather than slay Athena in her stone form."

That was correct. It was the only way to do things for a proper conclusion.

A face to face duel. To determine the victor.

Of course there were other options. The Holy Grail which had robbed Athena of her immortality. If a way could be found to remove and disable it...

But taking into account what Athena truly wished for, this was it.

"Your Majesty has been wavering all this time, right? And disaster will again descend upon many people. But everything can be solved — yes, everything will be solved. In that case, it's time for Ena to display some determination."

Godou was shocked. Once again, he was reminded of how adorable Ena could be.

Even though he had been unaware all along, this Hime-Miko was a raven-haired Yamato Nadeshiko rivaling Yuri, as well as being a very attractive girl.

This truth was now suddenly presented before him.

Part 3

"Ena originally planned to teach you all the knowledge about Athena. Tonight, with Your Majesty — umm, I was thinking there should be all kinds of things that needed to be done. Your Majesty is risking your life in a battle against a [Heretic God], so apart from offering knowledge there must be something else. That's what Ena was thinking..."

"A-Apart from knowledge!?"

Before he made his poignant outburst, Godou was already looking for an escape route.

Ena must surely be talking casually. Perhaps all she wanted to do was play games through the night.

Probably Uno or Hanafuda cards. Or maybe card games like Concentration[25] or Sevens.[26]

"Even though Your Majesty is very strong, there's still a chance of death... So before Your Majesty sets off for battle, Ena's body will accompany Your Majesty for the night, to help restore your energy. Perhaps in case of the worst outcome, Your Majesty's lineage can be preserved?"

Her intentions were explained rather concretely.

In other words, she had not misunderstood the meaning of " affair" in any way!

"P-Please calm down, Seishuuin. Let's just sit over there first."

"I've been sitting down calmly from the start."

"T-Then sit in seiza. Sit properly and listen seriously to me."

"I'm already sitting in seiza. Ena has been sitting seriously all this time. It's Your Majesty who needs to talk seriously."

All avenues of escape had been blocked. Was there no way left other than a frontal confrontation?

Godou crossed his legs and sat down before Ena.

"Well, how should I put it... I'm very grateful for your offer, but I believe that kind of behavior is only suitable for married couples. Is that clear?"

He calmly questioned her in earnest.

In any situation, there was no weapon more powerful than righteous sincerity. Probably.

"I've already said it before. Ena is fine being a woman of convenience. I'm not concerned with formalities. Besides, hasn't Your Majesty promised already? To have Ena by your side always. "

Ena objected with a pout. It was exactly as she described.

It was no longer an issue of sincerity but a matter of mental preparedness.

"Ah, but then again, Your Majesty did tell Ena before. Don't say anything like 'being a convenient woman is fine' again. Sorry, Ena forgot."

Isn't this complete daydreaming?

Ena seemed to have recalled the scene that made her think that. Dejectedly, she lowered her head. Head bowed, she began to hesitate as she muttered to herself.

"Still... Ena wants to be Your Majesty's bride."

A direct expression of her wish.

She displayed a shyness which made her usual unbelievable behavior seem like a sham.

Faced with Ena's current state, Godou began to feel his control slipping. He would not be able to hold out for long. This was bad.

"After all, I still want to dress in white all over and have some kind of ceremony... Can I?"

"N-N-N-N-No, of course not. Having said no, umm, rather, I should say instead, that kind of thing is too early for us!"

Finding Ena far too adorable, Godou diverted his gaze and desperately tried to explain.

If he had a little more experience in dealing with these situations, perhaps he could stay cool. But now he was reaching his limit. Being alone with a girl like this.

Furthermore, they had unwittingly sat on the same bedding.

Her body could be touched by a simple reach of the hand. This kind of distance was anything but reassuring.

Had it been Erica, Godou would usually be on high alert to prevent the mood from building up to such levels (though there were times when he failed). But this time Ena had made a surprise attack, completely ruining his usual precautions.

"Come on... Why doesn't Your Majesty want Ena to stay with you for the night?"

I beg you, please don't plead in such a cute manner.

Even though Godou wanted to loudly reject her, it would be equivalent to admitting defeat. It would be disclosing the fact that he was about to succumb.

"Ah, I see. Okay."

Ena suddenly stopped trying to be difficult and lowered her gaze again.

Looking down — she was staring at the blanket she was fiddling with her index finger.

"A girl like Ena, is not that cute and not very feminine, and neither very dignified nor virtuous. Ena can't possibly have that kind of personality, it can't be helped. And Your Majesty already has so many cute girls around you..."

"Don't say nonsense, it's nothing like that."

Faced with Ena's dejection, Godou instinctively reached out with his hand without thinking.

He placed his hand over her pristine white hand that was fiddling with the blanket, and held it tightly.

"You are a beautiful and cute girl. It's me who's not worthy."

Godou spoke sincerely as he gazed into Ena's face and eyes.

"Really?"

"Hoho, really. Believe me."

"Really... If Your Majesty says so, then Ena will not doubt."

The Hime-Miko of the Sword finally smiled again, and slowly closed her eyes.

Tilting her face up invitingly. The message was obvious.

—No choice but to make myself clear. Godou quietly pondered.

It was true that he simply lacked the courage to cross a certain boundary. With Erica and Yuri, as well as Liliana. It was also true that the thoughts of other girls were surfacing in his mind.

However, Ena's sincere offering of her heart finally made him realize.

Why was he still unable to act decisively? The reason? The violent desire entrenched in the deepest reaches of his heart.

Godou nodded. I have to do what I have decided.

Drawing near Ena's face, he took her by the lips.

Their lips pressed together, intimately caressing each other, melding their senses into one.

"S-So, Your Majesty, please forgive Ena for any failings in serving you..."

After a long kiss, Ena's lips released and whispered softly.

Her meekness made her usual boldness seem unreal. However, as the Hime-Miko tried to loosen the collar of her white garment, Godou shook his head once again.

"This is enough. It's still too early for that."

"Eh eh? Ena isn't cute enough after all..."

"No, it's not like that. How should I say it... I will... you— Could you wait for the time when I finally have the ability to shoulder all the hardship suffered by you girls?"

Godou pleaded quietly. His heart was no longer in disarray.

He was a man shouldering the lives of the girls close to him. The worst kind of man, one like a devil.

Yet at times like this, he had to rely on their sacrifices in order to fight.

Facing the absurd gods, fighting them on humanity's behalf.

Furthermore, the girls not only offered their lives but even the purity of their thoughts and lifestyle to Kusanagi Godou, displaying great will and spirit to accommodate him.

By now, Godou was strongly persuading himself.

"Even though I'm still a student, but anyway, the problem is, I feel like I'm not worthy enough for you to go that far for me. I — don't want to indulge myself in that area. I cannot lose to selfish desire."

"Cannot... lose?"

"Hoho, sorry. I'm very grateful for your kind offer, but listen, I'm going to say some obstinate things."

He was in intimate contact with both Ena's body and mind.

Who knew if other girls might join in the future? In that case, Godou's everyday life could turn into a paradise for his own personal pleasure.

However, indulgence in such pleasures could easily defang himself.

For the sake of battle, resolute will to face all trials and tribulations was indispensable —

It could easily be eroded.

That would be unacceptable. Fights with gods or trouble-making Devil Kings could arrive at any opportunity.

"If I accepted everything you offered, I probably wouldn't have survived my battles to this day. It's still too early. I must wait until I am worthy, only then can I calmly accept such things."

All was for the sake of battle. For victory.

This attractive girl's courtship came as a total surprise.

However, I have to finish tasks of higher priority first. Thus I will be completely obstinate.

Well, perhaps there existed people who say stuff like "having someone to protect might make me stronger." People who could make themselves sound very justified. I don't care about such justifications.

My enemies are not opponents that could be defeated by that level of strength.

The man who completely ignored ordinary life in society, only seeking to train himself to attain the level to slice gods apart.

The goddess who went so far as to bring ruin to the world simply for the sake of defeating Kusanagi Godou.

That was the sort of enemies Godou had.

"...I see. Well then, no other way. Ena will wait, Your Majesty."

No matter how you worded it, this was a fool's obstinacy. Why would Ena smile and answer so confidently?

"That kind of thing, I can understand. Ena also goes into the mountains frequently, because my power cannot be used unless the body and mind are purified. Even though it gets quite bad, and sometimes it's quite lonely."

The mystical technique of divine possession was an ultimate skill for obtaining divine spirit and power. This had been explained before.

The body and mind had to be pure in order to use the technique .

Letting deep mountain air diffuse through the internal organs, reaching a mental realm of absolute peace. These were said to be the user's duties.

They could not permit themselves to be contaminated by the mundane world's filth.

Hence Ena was obliged to enter sacred mountains frequently to purify herself. Apparently she never stayed at the village for more than a month at a time. This was not a life that any teenaged girl should lead.

Nevertheless, she had chosen this lifestyle by her own will.

"Please rest assured. After all, Ena is still a daughter from a family of warriors."

The daughter of the House of Seishuuin, the Hime-Miko of the Sword.

Her ancestors included daimyo during the Warring States era, explained the Yamato Nadeshiko cheerfully.

"But there were also husbands who went off to war and didn't return for a decade. Waiting for such long durations takes great resolution. So if I look at it that way, I will definitely be okay."

She was smiling staunchly as usual. Certain that Godou would one day reciprocate her feelings, Ena spoke:

"T-Therefore. Waiting is completely fine."

She expressed such a wish.

"Anyway, l-let's k-kiss first, okay? If so, I still want more."

With her eyes looking up at Godou, Ena was as adorable as a young child.

"If you want to fight Athena, the [Sword] is essential after all? Also... It's very sad. Previously, I could still bear it, but I really want to spend more time with Your Majesty, and have more contact with each other."

Furthermore, her eyes glistened with tears as she pleaded. Damn.

Godou cursed at himself. Faced with such words, how much further could he endure?!

He proceeded to kiss Ena silently.

No, it was not that gentle. He forcefully sealed her lips.

"Ah...mmm. Your Majesty, so forceful... Please be more gentle..."

Even though she pleaded softly, no, denied. It cannot stop.

Godou savagely drew Ena into his arms and leaned forward all the way.

He pressed his lips upon the Hime-Miko's soft and gentle lips. Everything she released out of her mouth belongs to me — her breath, saliva, words, everything was mine. A violent kiss.

Beneath one pair of lips, another pair was trembling.

This subtle movement further excited Godou.

Gasping for air, Ena's lips let go. But it was not allowed. Godou opened his mouth even wider and completely sealed the Hime-Miko's lips.

The sounds of their panting mixed together within their mouths , while saliva also mingled as one.

"Mmm... Your Majesty is so bad. Ena can't breath..."

Ena tearfully whispered.

Nevertheless, Ena did not try to escape from Godou's kiss. Instead she tightly embraced Godou as she pressed her adorable lips against his, wordlessly expressing more of her joyful emotions.

Hence Godou had nothing to worry about.

He forced his tongue into Ena's mouth, searching for her tongue . Found it.

Putting forth all his strength, he used his tongue to subdue Ena's tongue that was wriggling like a leech.

Twisting, turning and tangling. Their tongues clicked as they licked over and over again. Then boldly teased each other.

"Mmmhmm. Your Majesty, don't... do... do that any more."

She was already pleading.

This rare display of Ena's willfulness. It meant things had to be kicked up a notch.

Godou kissed passionately as he held the premier Hime-Miko's hand, squeezing tightly with great force, as if trying to affirm her existence. She immediately responded and held him tightly in turn .

Right hand held left hand.

Trying to establish further connections in addition to the mouths, they became one through natural thoughts and feelings.

—It was at this time, that Godou's heart felt like it was galloping /rushing/speeding away.

Godou possessed the sword that was Verethragna's final incarnation, the [Warrior] that wielded the blade of wisdom. The heretical sword of spell words that sliced apart ancient deities.

For the sake of preparing this sword, he was about to forge a link of wizardry with Ena.

Nevertheless, there was another sword.

Indeed. Kusanagi Godou's swords were two in number.

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi. Whether Seishuuin Ena or Kusanagi Godou, the divine sword that acted as their "partner."

Sword and sword. Double swords. Two users.

In addition, there was a new weapon —

Did this divine revelation come from a Campione's instincts? Or did it come from Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi?

It did not matter either way. For the sake of battle, anything and everything available will be used.

"Seishuuin. Let's adjust our plan slightly. Now our sword — we will see if we can draw out new possibilities from that guy."

"Yes... To obtain a new power. Your Majesty and Ena together."

Ena immediately nodded to Godou's soft whispers.

All said and done, she was the miko intimately connected to Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi. She, too, had received the divine revelation about the sword.

Part 4

"Wandering without aim, clearing up when the moon is seen, whence shall be my heart's final destination?"

Godou recalled his thoughts as he listened to Ena's spell words.

The spell used by Divine Ancestor Guinevere to instruct him, had already been explained by Liliana before she was petrified. It was most likely imparted via [Mystical Indoctrination].

[Instruction] only managed to teach knowledge and could not impart magical skills.

For spellcasting, it was said that aspects of feelings and mental preparation were more important than the knowledge component.

However, [Mystical Indoctrination] did not carry such a restriction.

It was super high level magic that even the silver-haired knight was unable to perform. The spell was also useless unless performed on someone who had already developed magical power. Furthermore, everything would be forgotten after a few days.

"Ready... Let's start again."

As Ena whispered, Godou approached and kissed her again.

In the room of this old building. Two people sat on one blanket. Despite the same location, a new and different ritual was about to start.

Godou began to speak as he pressed his and Ena's lips together.

"The Holy Grail is the artifact created by Divine Ancestor Guinevere when she was still a goddess."

The spell the Hime-Miko just performed was [Shared Spiritual Perception].

It was not the usual instruction spell for passing along knowledge. By evoking impressions and subtle feelings in the heart, it was a spell that allowed thoughts and emotions to be shared.

A spell achieved by multiple spellcasters — it was said to have been used during magical rituals.

A spell that failed to take form if the spellcasters' thoughts were in disarray.

"This artifact is like the medallion Erica once entrusted to me for safekeeping. Impossible to damage or destroy. As if embodying the truth of the world."

Then Godou began recounting the Holy Grail's origins.

God-slayer and Hime-Miko of the Sword. Both were the users of Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi. In order to confirm the sword's target, they spoke to and kissed each other.

Since the [Spell of the Holy Grail] was still in memory, it could be taught and imparted.

"Back when Guinevere was a goddess, the act of creating that astounding artifact apparently consumed the majority of her life. An immortal mother earth goddess. And then she truly died, offering the remainder of her life to the Holy Grail as her dying wish."

"No way eh... Even deities are powerless against that divine artifact..."

Respite for conversation, an opportunity to breathe. Ena busily pecked at Godou's lips.

Unlike the kissing earlier, she went about gently. However, or perhaps because having experienced bold intimate contact earlier, this felt fresh and delightful instead. In this manner, she calmly applied wizardry to the Campione.

"Consequentially, as the child of the Grail blessed by heaven, Guinevere is the most intimate being born from it. I learned from her that the Holy Grail is a device for absorbing the life force of mother earth goddesses. And also the method of activating that power."

Robbing a mother earth goddess' life, storing it as magical power.

In short, that was the Holy Grail's sole function. The white star — the one that created [Swords] must have been some other divine power.

"The vessel itself, cannot be damaged even if cut..."

"Right. But it might be possible to specifically sever the activated ability..."

Having confirmed the target, the two of them motionlessly gazed at each other before resuming contact with a light kiss.

In order to exploit Kusanagi Godou, Divine Ancestor Guinevere had given him knowledge and spellcraft.

Since she had forced them on him without permission in the first place, Godou was perfectly justified in using them for his own goals. So let me use them freely as I please.

The problem was whether it will work or not.

Will he be able to prepare properly and sever the Grail's function? After severing it, will he obtain the desired result? But no matter what, he had to try —

"Then, let's go. Your Majesty and Ena, the two of us will use Ama no Murakumo together... Hold onto this sensation..."

Ena murmured and slid her tongue inside.

Entering Godou's mouth with trepidation, she helplessly moved about with weak movements, searching for the other tongue.

It was only during such occasions that Ena truly cowered.

Godou laughed wryly and fiercely intercepted Ena's incoming tongue, sucking on it passionately.

"Ah!? I-I still haven't gotten used to this... Stop being such a bully..."

But Ena did not flee. So there was no cause for concern.

Frolicking with Ena's tongue to his heart's content, Godou then whispered in Ena's ear.

"This way... Come this way a bit. It's very hard to act in concert otherwise."

"Ah... Mmm, mmm. Got it, but don't bully me too much..."

Godou proceeded to bite her earlobe lightly and began to lick. Ena's breathing became progressively feeble.

She laughed and slightly adjusted her breathing.

Then she leaned in even closer. Even though Godou was sitting cross-legged, Ena simply bent down and planted herself onto him.

She then wrapped her legs around Godou.

In this manner, the two of them embraced each other more tightly together, face to face.

Ena's body, which had always been so energetic, was now devoid of vigor as she tightly entrusted the weight of her upper torso to Godou, leaning against him.

Pressed under Ena's amazingly voluptuous bosom, Godou fully experienced that sense of weight which conveyed their intimate embrace.

Her sweltering body was very supple with extremely smooth skin.

Godou enjoyed the sensations of Ena's entire body as he moved his hands to her back, tightly embracing her.

"Fuah... T-Tighter, hold me tighter. Even closer."

Ena pleaded as she seemed to frown painfully.

So the stronger the sense of bondage, the greater her enjoyment ? Just as she wished, Godou embraced her tightly with all his strength.

Held in his arms, Ena looked like she was smiling with intoxicated happiness.

"Ah... Your Majesty's heart... I can hear it beating so loudly."

"Isn't it the same for you? Seems like you're busy panting away. "

Held tightly together, they could feel the beating in each other's chest. Then they gazed into each other's eyes, smiling at each other and kissed again.

The two were sitting together cross-legged, entangled with each other, endlessly exchanging kisses.

As more magical connections were made, Godou's excitement was transmitted to Ena as Ena's intoxication passed onto Godou.

"Your Majesty, did you know? Ena can sense Ama no Murakumo sleeping in Your Majesty's body...?"

As Ena whispered during the brief respite between kisses, Godou nodded.

The Hime-Miko of the Sword was the divine sword's previous wielder. Compared to the current wielder, she was better able to sense its existence and skillfully wield it.

Ena had sensed Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi hidden in Godou's right arm. The feeling was transmitted.

"Ama no Murakumo... Please conjure the image of being wielded by two people at once. Ena's hand, overlapping with His Majesty's hand... Raised up high..."

This time, she slurred her words as their lips came together while they kissed.

The image depicted in Ena's heart was transmitted. Then stored into the sheathed Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi. The Hime-Miko's pristine white hand grasping the sword's hilt. Godou also imagined it.

Ena's hand holding the divine sword, covered by his own hand and held even tighter.

"Ah... Don't do that, Your Majesty... It's going to hurt, please be more gentle, slowly... I beg you..."

Ena expressed her pain drowsily. If he did not proceed with greater caution —

For the sake of preventing the adorable maiden from suffering, Godou began to concentrate as hard as he could.

Reaching for the delicate hand with which she prided in her swordsmanship, Godou slowly placed his hand over her palm, then intertwined his fingers with those long, slender and pale fingers of hers.

Even though the action was taking place within their hearts, somehow Godou could feel the smoothness of Ena's sweat-moistened skin.

Godou gently held her hand as he savored that exceptionally tender sensation.

"Yes like that... Slowly... Ah, a little off..."

The two controlled the hands imagined in their hearts in concert .

The overlapping fingers were slightly off, so they carefully shifted and repositioned. Because they were not accustomed to this task, it was similar to feeling their way through absolute darkness.

"Ooh... Like that... Okay... Ah, no good, too much force... It strayed again... Mmm, mmm, right, over here is... Good, that's the way—!"

Finally, Godou and Ena were able to grab a hold of Ama no Murakumo in its scabbard.

Ena tearfully smiled at Godou, having finally accomplished the task so clumsily. She must be troubled by this unfamiliar type of cooperative action.

Overcome with tender affection, Godou once again stole her lips.

This time, Ena's tongue greeted him with initiative. She must have felt it abundantly.

Mixed together, the viscous saliva moistened the corners of their mouths. Thoughts and feelings melded into one.

Let's get this over with in one go. A mental image appeared of the two of them drawing Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi out from its scabbard together.

Unsheathing the sword and swinging it together in perfect unison. Godou and Ena forged new and deeper bonds with each other through Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi.

Immediately, their surroundings were met with drastic change. Their room had been completely surrounded by fire.

Part 5

Illuminated by crimson glow, the room in the residence was entirely surrounded by burning flames.

Had this been an actual fire, it would have burned the entire building to the ground. Abnormally scorching hot. However,

Godou and Ena were the only ones not swallowed by the tongues of fire.

Clearly this was the result of some supernatural phenomena. Furthermore, the culprit's identity was obvious.

"A fire... illusion? Why would that fellow do that?"

"Your Majesty, that... Has appeared before Ena and us."

Prompted by Ena, Godou noticed.

Hitherto unbeknownst to them, Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi had manifested. Embedded in the floor was the magnificent three-foot three-and-a-half-inch blade. The splendorous sight did not befit this countryside residence.

However, the visual impact of the burning flames was really quite a fantastic sight.

'Hmm. Have you learned slightly how to use me?'

Godou finally heard Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi's voice clearly.

Even though he had heard it during the battle against the Great Sage Equaling Heaven, it was much clearer now.

"It's Ena. Did you appear so that we can wield the sword together?"

'Correct. It would be easier for me to talk to you two like this. This will also mean less trouble for you.'

True. Godou nodded in agreement with this impolite answer.

The divine sword which had asked to be called "partner," had been quite meddlesome all along.

"It's true that this is easier to talk... But why the fire?"

'You two plan on forging a new sword, right? Fire is crucial in the birth of a sword.'

Is that so? Godou coldly stared at the fire illusion.

This fellow really loved making scenes, and was probably kindred spirits with the [Boar].

'Well, that is the situation. In light of what your cooperation has achieved, the assistance I can provide has expanded in scope. This is commendable. King, I shall answer your request.'

Despite being Godou's possession, the sword rambled on defiantly.

What kind of "partner" was this? The sword acted like it was an equal. But Godou did not mind.

"Then you are aware of that!?"

'Correct. Melding sword together with sword. Two swords into one. But do not get your hopes up too high. The target is an immortal indestructible divine artifact. It is uncertain whether my power will prove effective...'

The divine sword warned calmly. Even so, Godou felt very gratified.

Ena was also smiling as if elated. Perhaps she had always been in communion with the divine sword like this.

"By the way, you've been following that old gramps Susanoo for a long time, right? What on earth is that Heavenly Reverse Halberd thing?"

Godou brought up the question that suddenly entered his mind.

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi had been the ancient god's personal sword for eons.

'Ahah, that? No idea. And even if I did, no comment.'

"Well then, did the elders say anything about why they won't respond to Ena's queries?"

'No idea either. Don't care.'

After repeating these cold responses, the divine sword said:

'Stop asking me these kinds of things. As a sword amongst sword gods, I am also a divinity belonging to an extremely loyal

clique, right? I only care about things related to battle. Everything else is irrelevant. Trivial things that only dull the sword's blade.'

"Ah yes, you've said that before, I remember."

Ena spoke as if remembering.

"But then, I already noticed during the time with the Great Sage Equaling Heaven. That monkey didn't give off this kind of impression? Other than fighting, he also liked having fun and playing pranks."

'That guy is a half-breed, miko. A hybrid god who amalgamated various elements and divinities besides a sword god's. Completely different from pure [Steel] descending from the most primitive lineage. That type of fellow is nowhere near as pure as me, and displays much more complicated traits as a divinity.'

So I see. There were many differences in origins between gods.

Godou felt impressed as Ama no Murakumo continued to look down at him as it spoke:

'So King, just show me a man's mettle as a partner worthy of my cooperation. If you were to lose to an earth goddess, it would taint the honor of us swords!'

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi and the illusory flames. Both suddenly disappeared.

Godou and Ena finally finished the ritual.

Chirp chirp, chirp chirp. It was the sound of birds twittering.

Refreshingly bright morning rays shone in from the window.

—It was a good night's rest, thought Godou as he lay beneath the blanket.

With a little time before becoming completely wide awake, there was a very pleasant and comfortable feeling.

Opening his eyes slightly, he surveyed the room.

It was still the same room. After ending the ritual, Godou had fallen asleep exhausted.

He checked his cellphone by his pillow for messages — none. Godou felt relieved.

Nothing seemed to have happened to Athena's statue standing on the beach. The embarrassment of sleeping through an urgent message had been averted.

Godou began to enjoy once again the warm and comforting feeling of contact with the blanket and human skin.

He felt a little sorry for those responsible for guarding throughout the night. He must get up earlier and prepare properly for battle. However, what was with this reluctance to leave the warm sensation of human skin...

Hmm? Skin? Human skin?

His mind instantly became fully awake. Godou flipped the blanket over.

—Seishuuin Ena was sleeping right by his side. Could it be possible, they had slept together!?

The memories after the ritual were fuzzy. He must have been so tired he instantly slept like a log.

But Ena's appearance.

The Hime-Miko of the Sword had taken off her miko outfit.

Scattered beside the bedding were various red and white garments she had taken off. Did she remove them before or during her sleep?

Anyway, before Godou's eyes lay Seishuuin Ena, completely naked.

The manner of appearance every human was born with. Voluptuous in all the right places, yet slim and delicate everywhere else, a miraculous figure.

Last witnessed at the Chuuzenji hot springs, it was the sight akin to precious white jade.

Godou came to realize that the object he embraced as he slept, tenderly treasuring its warmth, and had even toyed with and enjoyed roughly, could it be this!

"...Ah. Your Majesty woke up— Iyaaah!"

Ena woke up at the worst possible moment.

The drowsiness only lasted briefly. Immediately coming to her senses, she grabbed the blanket and pulled it to her side.

Covering up the naked body that was being illuminated by the bright rays of the morning sun. Frantically making cute little screams.

"S-Seishuuin... You slept here..."

"Yes yes. Using divine possession yesterday was already very tiring... I think I fell asleep immediately after the ritual. But the memories are very fuzzy."

Not only her face, the entirety of Ena's pale white skin had turned red.

It was readily apparent from the exposed portions of her shoulders and chest, as well as her thighs and bare legs.

"I-I have no idea. It feels like after the ritual, Your Majesty and I simply fell headlong into the sheets. And then went to sleep like that."

"L-Like that eh?"

The two were conversing stiffly with their faces all red.

"B-But. Something slightly worrying... Ena can't remember taking clothes off... Does that mean, Your Majesty removed them?"

"N-N-N-No, no way. Or rather... Probably not? Umm?"

Godou was shocked. Even though he was completely certain he had no recollection, it also seemed like Ena did not undress herself.

Hence, it could not be asserted either way. Could I have done something so bestial?

Bearing the heavy blow to his self image, Godou walked unsteadily over to the window.

Looking out at the beach before him. It was still heavily guarded.

It was finally the day to reach an ultimate conclusion with Athena —

Chapter 6 - Before the Duel

Part 1

A beautiful garden was situated before a mansion reminiscent of Heian era palatial architecture.

Rockery was heaped and trees were casually planted at calculated positions. The constructed pond was wide enough for boats and even contained three islands, linked to one another by vermilion-painted bridges.

A specially allotted plot of land which embodied the essence of beautiful natural scenery.

There was only one inhabitant in this garden.

This alluring otherworldly beauty, whose eyes were dark with worry.

Even though she was wearing a traditional kimono in the extravagant style of the juunihitoe[27], her hair was flaxen in color instead of black. Her eyes were the color of glass. The features of the beautiful face seemed almost sculpted. All this was evidence that she was no native of Japan.

"Oh, did you sense the chaos in the real world too, Princess?"

Someone greeted the Princess who was standing on the pond's edge as she gazed at the water surface.

"Yes. The attendant of the 'King of the End' seems to have finally discovered that Japan is the location of the king's grave..."

The Princess of Glass turned around to face the strongly-built old man.

Compared to the Princess' juunihitoe, his clothing style was even more ancient.

A white tight-sleeved gown combined with a loose-fitting hakama. Had the hair been divided into left and right halves and tied near the ears, the appearance would greatly resemble Yamato Takeru.

However, his disheveled hair was as unruly as a bird's nest.

"By human calendars, he must have slept for over a millennium. One could say it is time for the tide to ebb. It appears that the brat will soon awaken."

The elderly hero spoke with a bored expression.

The Princess and others called him "The Old One." His name was Haya Susanoo no Mikoto, and was once the [Heretic God] who wandered the earth, bearing the Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi.

Now he had made the Netherworld his home, living in seclusion.

Abandoning the human world and all sorts of troublesome issues, living like a hermit in this place. Like him, the Princess was

doing the same thing. However, there were intertwined fates which could never be severed no matter what.

"In the end, even though I escaped to a place like this, he could very well still be connected to me somehow..."

Susanoo naturally recalled his last appearance.

A layer of poignant battle-hardened vigor gradually proliferated across his originally handsome face like the spreading of iron rust. And carved out deeply an expression of battle-weariness —

“Because the one who put you all in this state, was that brat."

The elderly god went "hmph" in response to the Princess' worries.

"Well, since we're already here, then just treat it as a vacation to high places for now. We're all just a bunch of retired geriatrics. After all, it's about time we stop intervening in the troubles of the human world."

The Princess nodded. Right. But first, the situation had to be followed closely.

How should the dying mother earth goddess be dealt with? Or perhaps it will finally be clear whether Kusanagi Godou had the power to cause vexation to the "King of the End."

How will he respond to that goddess' wish —?

The Princess cast her gaze towards the pond surface. Just like that, the situation on earth was reflected onto the water surface. Like the women known as the Divine Ancestors, she was also one who controlled magic as easily as if it were the simple act of breathing.

Part 2

"Now, the news media have all been successfully brought under control."

Sayanomiya Kaoru remarked as she watched the mini One-Seg[28] television.

It was a Sunday morning news show known for its distinctive style. On the four-inch screen, several commentators were chatting amiably with the host.

"Even though parts of Kawasaki and the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway, as well as the artificial island of Umihotaru have been petrified... Major incidents of that sort are taking place right now, as long as there are no reports, 99% of the citizens will be completely oblivious of the truth."

Within Kisarazu city in the Chiba prefecture, Athena's statue stood upright on the shore.

After getting dressed and finishing breakfast, Godou returned to this place, and Kaoru immediately arrived.

With that, the preparation and background work were all complete.

"Wow, none of the stations have reported any news about this region."

Impressed, Godou exclaimed.

During this time before the battle, Kaoru had brought the One-Seg television here and had been changing channels repeatedly, checking all sorts of shows.

Unwittingly, their gaze was cast towards the sea.

From the Kisarazu coast, extending towards the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway —

Umihotaru and its surroundings had been transformed into a desolate palace of stone.

Furthermore, the tunnel connecting to Kawasaki was parked with hundreds of vehicles all turned into stone.

Within the vehicles sat many statues. Since the car doors could not be opened, there was no way to rescue passengers. Nevertheless, it would have been impossible to understand the situation if one were viewing from afar.

"Originally, this would be a critical incident that would naturally have special reports broadcasted on every station. If Athena's appearance could be widely disseminated to all parties,

perhaps the affected areas could have been reduced slightly in scope... At least, Haneda Airport would not have been caught up in this."

Godou nodded in agreement with Kaoru.

The number of associated personnel at the Airport must be much lower in comparison, which would make it much more difficult to keep information secret.

"What about online?"

"It's kind of borderline. The nearby residents are suspicious, and there have been complaints posted on blogs and forums, but we will do our utmost to control the situation."

Kaoru explained fluently.

Come to think of it, Amakasu had once explained "doing this and that to the servers in an emergency" when Godou wondered about their emergency computer policy.

They must be diligently preparing for that as well.

"We disclosed some plausible-sounding speculation and false information, including some facts that we deliberately mixed in. Well, there is no way for anyone to gather definitive intelligence anywhere near the truth without our knowing. Besides, there's *that* no matter what."

"That?"

"I don't think anyone easily accepts as truth what they read about online, right? Especially if the actual situation is ridiculous and unbelievable."

That was true too. Godou understood.

Even if someone revealed the truth directly, they would be suspected of mental illness, or at least thought to be joking.

Godou's mother, Kusanagi Mayo, had once recounted with great seriousness the story of the relative who had been sent to the United States Marine Corps for counseling camp and rehabilitation because of delusions that "Michael Jackson will revive one year from now to bring salvation to mankind." His mother's words were still fresh in Godou's mind.

To Godou's knowledge, she was probably the most ridiculous unbelievable woman he ever knew.

"The only way to know the truth would be to visit the scene. However, people able to break through the blockade prepared by our Committee do not exist in the normal world."

"There's probably no need to worry to that extent. I'm sure that the petrified people and objects will be recovered."

"Understood. Then hurry and prepare to save them. You really are using the [Sword], right?"

Godou shook his head at Kaoru's question.

That was the natural decision after all. Kaoru's suggested method was correct. A choice of action that could resolve the incident without any challenge.

Just slay Athena while she was still in stone.

The petrification wrought by Athena could be easily neutralized by the [Sword]'s spell words.

Even someone nowhere near as smart as Kaoru should be able to understand that her suggestion was correct. However, Kusanagi Godou could not take that choice. If he did, it would not be able to satisfy all his wishes. Saving Yuri and Liliana, as well as everyone else, dealing with that goddess' determined wish— It could not satisfy this willful impulse.

"The [Sword] needs to be used somewhere else. Please continue to prepare for saving the people turned into stone. Things should probably go as planned."

Even though he could not explain it, Godou was certain. Tentatively.

All along, gods had never acted in any underhanded manner like villains. At least from the perspective of their own intentions. This was probably similar to the reason why they never acknowledged humans in the slightest.

That said, it was impossible to guarantee.

Godou was exasperated at himself for taking on such a gamble.

"Your wish is my command, my king. No matter what, all you need to do is ask."

Kaoru replied respectfully. It was delivered with elegance as if spoken by some upper class noble who had left the royal palace.

Due to the speaker being an elegant cross-dressing beauty, the effect was even more pronounced.

"Really, I'm always bringing trouble..."

"Following the decrees of Your Highness the Devil King is our duty. Please pay no heed to it. As for me personally, there is a substantial gamble involved. Even though what I staked currently escapes me."

Kaoru signaled with her eyes as Godou became suspicious.

"Using methods beyond my imagination, and taking action in ways I am not permitted by my position. It is a rare treat for me to be able to assist Kusanagi-san like this. Well, it's still too early to say what might happen to Yuri and the rest, but my heart sure is racing at this point."

The History Compilation Committee core member smiled, lightly biting her lip.

As an eighteen-year-old woman, her chest was surprisingly svelte.

"Precisely because of this dark side, as long as my wits and talents can keep up with your capricious and overbearing ways, I actually welcome all your unreasonable demands. This is an opportunity for you to entice to your side someone like me who is able to assist you."

She was like a beautiful devil marketing herself as the great Devil King's right hand. Or perhaps Mephistopheles[29] visiting Dr Faust.

Having to deal with a beauty of this sort, Godou could not help but start staring at the sky. His faction seemed to be filling its ranks in an anarchic direction...

"Sooner or later, I will become the Committee's Chairperson and administer the wizardry world of the entire country. But having such a smooth path laid out for me is not very meaningful. Creating a new venture with one's own hands... That's the way I like to do things."

She was the next head of one the Four Families, as well as being a Hime-Miko.

The kinship ties to their families, entrapping Kaoru as well as Ena, perhaps ran even deeper than could be imagined.

"In order to get closer to the lifestyle I prefer, please allow me to make use of you as much as possible in our dealings. Consequently, do not worry unnecessarily... Well then, that's it for me. Let's handle everything properly from now."

"I will rely on you to take care of Mariya and Liliana for me."

Godou bowed his head as Kaoru departed.

After being rescued from the Umihotaru artificial island yesterday, they had been taken to a hospital near the shore. Naturally, it was a facility backed by the Committee.

Due to the proximity of the Heavenly Reverse Halberd's hiding spot, that type of facility was particularly common in the area.

"Most certainly. No matter what situation arises, I will keep things under control. Please fight without reservation."

Kaoru's encouragement was slightly suspect on a moral level, but Godou felt gratified.

Once her figure had disappeared in the distance, Godou turned to the other person involved.

— Heretic Athena. The goddess who had turned herself into a statue.

There was no one else in the area apart from Godou and her. The security team had already left the shore. The Committee had been busy sealing areas of the city that surrounded this coast, telling residents about 'the abortive poison gas leak,' urging them to undertake emergency evacuations during the night before morning arrived.

Ena had also left for a certain mission.

Preparations were fully complete. Godou drew his weapon without hesitation.

"As the one who holds all victory in my hands, I am the strongest. All enemies, all who harbor enmity will be vanquished!"

The scripture of Verethragna, the god of victory. However, there was more to it.

"This was where Susanoo no Mikoto started his uprising, leading a thousand savage gods!"

He also chanted scripture connected to Susanoo's beloved sword.

In order to combine two blades into one.

In order to combine spell words with the divine sword.

"A thousand swords standing upon the earth, used as city walls to defend against the enemies. Namely, the Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi."

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi had the ability to absorb the ten incarnations of Verethragna used by Godou, thereby amplifying each other's divine power, manifesting new powers.

Just like the railgun used against the Great Sage Equaling Heaven last time.

'King. The power produced by the sword's spell words have been received.'

Godou sensed Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi's thoughts coming from his right arm.

'In a normal battle, your blade is the sword of wisdom for slicing gods apart. However, the blade formed from our union is different. It is truly the sword of wisdom for severing an immortal indestructible divine artifact.'

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi, both a deity and a divine artifact at the same time.

The blade formed from the union of such an existence was the weapon for slicing through divine artifacts instead of gods.

'Using your knowledge of the Holy Grail, the sharpness of the blade has been altered. Now is the time for foes to be vanquished and invaders to perish. Swing to your heart's content!'

In the past, the blade had always formed from comprehension of a god.

But this time it was a blade formed with the wish to destroy a completely understood divine artifact. In particular, Godou was targeting the culprit that was draining Athena's life — the Holy Grail.

The knowledge had been deliberately instilled by Guinevere. I shall take advantage of it in return!

"Right. I am very grateful I can use it. Let's go!"

'Affirmative! I am the steel that tears through a thousand blades ! Awaiting your command!'

The wielder and the divine sword's thoughts were aligned.

In the battle against the Great Sage Equaling Heaven, Godou's battle spirit and magical power had been raised to the highest limits. Consequently, he could now resonate with Ama no Murakumo and draw out that power even under normal conditions.

On the other hand, this was before the battle started.

Had this been a situation similar to the past, he would not be able to wield it with full control.

However, having gone through the ritual with Ena, Godou had now awakened as the possessor of Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi —

"Man and devil — all enemies, all who harbor enmity will be vanquished!"

Responding to the spell words, Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi manifested in Godou's right hand.

The spectacular blade measuring three feet and three-and-a-half inches. But unlike its usual appearance, the blade was brilliant gold instead of jet-black in color. The same color as Verethragna's sword.

'The holy vessel of taboo! Wither like scattered flowers!'

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi called out as it hurtled towards the statue of pubescent Athena.

The golden blade pierced her delicate chest completely.

However, what Godou's right hand felt was not the sensation of tearing through stone or the goddess, instead it was surely the penetration of the ancient divine artifact.

Quietly drawing out the blade, he dispelled Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi with a wave of the hand. With that, Godou waited.

Five seconds, ten seconds... Almost a minute had passed. Athena finally opened her eyes.

The statue of gray stone was restored to a young girl's supple body of flesh. Her hair once again displayed brilliance and luster as if melded with moonlight.

The Holy Grail had been absorbing her life force.

She must have released her stone form after noticing the interruption of the Grail's action.

"Kusanagi Godou... Is this thy doing? Thou hast given a blow to the Holy Grail within one's body?"

This could very well be the first time Godou witnessed such an expression on her face.

Goddess Athena's pubescent face was gazing upon the god-slayer with admiring approval.

Part 3

"It's been a day. Even though I have many things I'd like to say, let me make a request first."

With many questions for Athena, Godou began in this manner.

"It's not like I want a return favor for helping you, so it's a request. Could you return everyone and everything that had been petrified back to normal?"

"Forsooth?"

"You said you wanted a no holds barred battle with me. Since we're fighting anyway, releasing them won't matter to you, right? On the other hand, if I am forced into battle in this manner, it's like having hostages. I will be worrying about the people turned into stone and unable to concentrate on fighting."

"Is that what thou wished to say?"

She must have felt insulted.

Athena's approving expression vanished, turning into a piercing stare.

"Thou art planning to rely on the humans once they are liberated from their interim death, thereby obtaining dishonorable victory. How impertinent! How shameless! As the goddess of the Divine Realm, Athena cannot approve of such underhanded tactics . Knowest thou hast misspoken!"

A furious shout. It was basic truth. Gods did not care for humans, simply considering them stones. The thought of "hostages " probably never crossed their minds.

"To me, those petrified people are very important. Even if you can't empathize, it is truly what I feel. So please, restore everything first. Wouldn't doing something so low as taking hostages taint your authority?"

No matter what, it was necessary to provoke Athena's sense of pride.

Since he had used Verethragna's [Sword] to halt the Holy Grail's function, there was no other way to dispel the petrification. This was why he chose to do things this way.

He still had a chance. It was not time to give up yet.

Luo Cuilian had once said: 'A god's strength is proportional to the strength of their ego.'

Thinking over his past battles, Godou felt this was something he agreed with.

Furthermore, Kusanagi Godou discovered another point. In proportion to the strength of their ego, they also carried a lot of pride.

Even though all gods inevitably brought calamity to people, they did not act despicably. All they wanted was to leisurely display their superiority. Even that mischievous Great Sage was the same.

In that case, such an accusation should come as blow to Athena's pride.

Particularly in this situation when she owed him a favor, it was quite probable she would accept his request.

It was a kind of gamble. However, the goddess ultimately had only one wish. If Athena said no — the thought made Godou feel like a stomach ache was coming.

Nevertheless, even though it seemed like what Kaoru had said... Godou did not agree.

He believed there was another reason why his gamble would pay off.

The haughty and self-centered goddess would not disappoint. Even though it sounded rather strange, Godou trusted her.

"Hmph. Very well then."

The goddess smacked her lips as she spoke.

"As thy senior on the battlefield, for one to bestow charity upon thee, 'tis only proper for a queen. Conversely, accepting thy charity would taint this goddess' honor. Very well, Kusanagi Godou. This once, one shall grant thy request."

Athena proceeded to release a pulse of magic for just an instant. It flew towards the sea — the direction where the petrified Trans-Tokyo Bay Harbor ran.

After a short while, Godou's cellphone began to vibrate in his pocket.

Kaoru had informed him that rescue operations had begun.

"Sorry for troubling you. Thank you very much."

"Thy gratitude is not needed. Rather, thou shouldst reflect upon thy shameless heart and impertinent commentary on a queen. Regardless, thou hast already spoken."

Athena sneered lightly.

Like a ferocious bird of prey having discovered its target, or the delighted expression of a poisonous snake about to swallow its prey.

"Thou wert talking about fighting again with hostages held against thee — hast thou realized thy foolishness, and changed thy mind?"

"Not really. I don't have anything I need to change my mind about."

Godou dismissed his elated foe's accusation.

"Anyway, what happened to the Holy Grail? It's the culprit that robbed you of immortality, right? For now, I think it's been successfully eliminated."

"Forsooth. Thy attack was splendid indeed..."

Why? Athena was showing the same expression as from their first encounter.

A smile carrying slight gentleness. It was like the reassured expression of an elder witnessing the growth of the younger generation.

Sword and sword. Was she praising the combination technique that sliced apart the Holy Grail?

Or perhaps, she bore this smile for other reasons? The goddess' heart was impossible to discern.

"The Holy Grail in one's body hath been critically damaged and halted in function. With that, it hath temporarily stopped draining one's life."

"Temporarily?"

"Yes. Temporarily. The sun shall rise and set once again. Repeating thus ad infinitum. To be able to press an immortal indestructible divine artifact into such a corner, 'tis a magnificent sword."

Athena praised lightly.

She softly pressed her hand against the child-like abdomen beneath her Greek garments.

She must have concluded this by using her power as the goddess of wisdom (probably similar to Yuri's spirit vision but hundreds of times more powerful in perception) to examine the Holy Grail within her.

"Thou hast also witnessed the Divine Sword of Salvation? Forsooth, 'tis difficult to retrieve the majority of this goddess' stolen life with one's remaining strength. Should the Holy Grail successfully start up again, one's remaining life shall be lost immediately. Hohoho, forsooth, having this respite is cause for celebration."

Athena indifferently revealed her inevitable death that was to arrive in a matter of days.

The Grail was impossible to destroy after all? Since this possibility had been considered beforehand, it did not come as too much of a disappointment to Godou.

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi had already hinted. Had Verethragna's [Sword] been able to achieve that, it would not be surprising to seal a Campione's authority semi-permanently. But in all his battles so far, no god had been defeated by just the [Sword] alone...

Even though it was a convenient weapon combining offense and defense, it always seemed lacking in a certain decisive power.

It cannot be helped. In that case, I will fight in the manner I have decided.

"Intentionally sealing the Holy Grail and rousing this goddess from slumber. Thou finally wishest to have a proper duel? Dost thou intend to respond to one's valor, standing atop the battlefield ? 'Tis most agreeable!"

"That's not right. Like I just said, my intentions have not changed."

Godou shook his head at the queen of warriors who was smiling glamorously.

No doubt about it. I will adhere to my own way of doing things no matter what.

"However, if your dying wish is a battle with me, I will respond more or less. A battle without any reservations. But it has to be undertaken in my manner."

"Thy manner?"

"That's right. Victory will be mine. I won't let Athena who wishes to kill me leave without being taught a lesson. After that, I will take that Holy Grail... that thing that's killing you, and show you how to stop it no matter what. Finally, just like last time, I'll drive you out of Japan."

"...Having reached this critical point, thou still utterest such delusions. One's death hast already been set in stone."

Godou immediately interrupted Athena's mournful speech.

"It's the Holy Grail and the whatever divine blade of salvation that's killing you, right? If I catch the owner Guinevere and find out all the details, then go to the Netherworld to seek out those old guys, there must be a way."

It could very well achieve nothing but delay the inevitable. Nevertheless, that was what Godou decided.

"I'd be very troubled if you died. I still haven't heard your wish. "

"One hast already expressed clearly. Answerest this goddess' challenge, showest thy will and spirit. That shall be the price."

Godou stared back at the snake goddess' gaze.

"I've also mentioned already. I won't listen to any request that brings troubles to the surrounding people. Therefore our battle

doesn't count. I'll first defeat you, then help you, and listen to another request. Because I have already decided, you must use force if you want to change my mind."

Saving Athena from the Holy Grail. That was easy to say.

On the other hand, it would be challenging to achieve. A dark and unguided path lay ahead. Which was why he wanted to exhibit his "will and spirit" to Athena before the worst outcome arrived.

For the sake of this goddess who expressly wished to duel Kusanagi Godou before she died.

...Despite being a civilized person who treasured peace, the option of "don't fight Athena and find out how to deal with the Grail" seemed to have disappeared from his mind.

Why Godou rejected such a plan, the reason was as clear as day.

"Impressive, such growth in this short time."

Almost about to say something astounding, Athena shook her head.

It did not seem like the behavior of a great goddess, but more like a human's instead.

"Thou art careless, an illegitimate child of the fool after all! Forsooth, thou holdst onto incomprehensible weakness, how much longer couldst thou survive!?"

She spoke sonorously in a soprano pitch.

Godou did not miss the sardonic glimmer accompanying the goddess' gaze.

"One doth not think thou canst become strong while bearing such weakness... Foolish, forsooth 'tis foolish — Alas, it cannot be helped! Furthermore, thou seekest a battle of might against the goddess of war, such boldness should have limits!" The goddess who always bore an expressionless poker face, was now exclaiming with a delighted expression.

So this kind of expression was actually possible for her. Godou thought rather rudely to himself.

"Very well, thou sayst thou shalt defeat Athena. The manner thou described should not work. Then one's valor shall enlighten Kusanagi Godou. Shouldst thou have any objections, then thou shalt voice them through force as thou hast proposed."

She must have meant something like "If you win then I don't mind listening to you."

Seeing Athena's joyful expression, Godou believed without cause.

Completely baseless. But incredibly, that was what he believed. He proceeded to stroll slowly across the beach, listening to the sound of breaking waves as he walked.

Without saying a word, Athena followed along, quietly walking behind Godou.

Even though it would be fine to get started immediately, he still wanted to rouse his battle spirits first. Athena must be thinking the same thing.

God and god-slayer walked as they savored their connection forged by fate.

The kind of fateful relationship written as mortal enemy but read aloud as "friend," impossible to articulate to others.

The first sign of change Guinevere noticed was the disappearance of the Holy Grail's presence.

She was the reincarnation of the goddess who created the Holy Grail. No matter how far they were separated, even when Athena had devoured the Grail, Guinevere remained firmly aware of its presence. But now, the feeling was suddenly gone.

Furthermore, there was a second change.

She sensed the disappearance of the divine power that had been saturating the area.

Athena's power had vanished. The power that turned everything into stone, whether living things or inanimate objects, organic or inorganic.

Guinevere was currently located on the shore a few dozens of kilometers away from where the goddess had turned herself into stone.

Not at a scenic beach but on top of a treacherous cliff. Beneath her, the early winter sea was crashing against the rocks, producing waves of white.

Guinevere immediately used the clairvoyant [Witch's Eye] to enhance her vision, and watched.

—The great road built over the sea by human hands.

—The castle built over there like some kind of ship and fortress hybrid.

—The coastal town on the opposite shore to where Guinevere and the goddess were located.

Not too long ago everything was still stone. Whether buildings, roads, ponds or marshes. Even parts of the ocean. Living things, beasts, insignificant microorganisms, flying insects and crawling bugs, everything.

All had been carcasses of stone. A graveyard of stone.

All of a sudden, everything had been restored. Restored to life and vigor, or perhaps simply their original state. All the people and animals that had been turned to stone now lay sprawled and sleeping wherever they were.

"The curse of petrification is temporary death rather than true slaughter. Bringing things back to life must be child's play for Athena..."

(Beloved child, find Athena, or that young god-slayer!)

Lancelot's reproach could be heard. Watching over from afar, he too, had noticed the change.

Guinevere frantically sent a flying [Eye] towards the beach where Athena had turned herself into stone.

Saw it. Facing off against Kusanagi Godou, the awakened goddess —

Guinevere concluded the spell of the [Witch's Eye] and immediately used flight magic, taking to the skies, surrounded by white light as she flew through the air.

In any case, she had to hasten to the scene and investigate what happened exactly.

Then assist Kusanagi Godou so that he can defeat the goddess.

Just as Guinevere was making her plans and flying without distraction, she was ambushed.

Seishuuin Ena was called the Hime-Miko of the Sword.

However, her martial arts mastery was not limited to the sword but also included the naginata. She was also talented in jujutsu.[30] Not only that, she was also trained in the shuriken[31] and the jutte [32] and concealed weapons known as *anki.*[33] Furthermore, she knew archery.

Unfortunately, it was not up to the level known as the art of the bow.

No matter what, preparing the bow, sighting the target by chance, casually nocking the arrow and hitting the target was no easy task.

Nevertheless, with her exceptionally outstanding vision and excellent instincts, Ena was able to get a good aim at her target.

"O Great God of Arms, I beseech your aid against my enemy... May this arrow strike right on target."

To be on the safe side, she had applied the spell of the [Evil Vanquishing Arrow] beforehand.

It was a spell that guaranteed penetration even if the target was intangible spirits or ectoplasm, or protected by projectile deflecting spells.

Ena was located on the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway.

Roughly a couple hundred meters away from the Kisarazu junction entrance. Due to traffic restrictions, there were no cars on the road.

Preparations were complete. And then the bright light of the target was sighted.

A flying white light. So fast. Flying with substantial speed. Almost about to cross the airspace over the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway. The destination was Athena's beach as expected.

"Pay good attention. I can let you off for running around doing sneaky things in the dark, but I won't let you come disturb His Majesty deliberately!"

Grumbling to herself, she locked the target in her sights.

The white light should be Divine Ancestor Guinevere. Ena expected it and had been watching the sky alertly from a place with an open view.

The flying witch appeared in the air above the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway.

Ena shot the arrow with a whoosh.

The arrow that was expected to strike in one hit. Furthermore, this was a specially crafted arrow sent from the Seishuuin home, a magic bullet carrying evil-exorcising and spirit-revealing properties.

This arrow reached several kilometers up into the air.

That kind of distance was not possible to fire from a bow. This was also one of the magical powers hidden in the magic bullet. Exceptional range and penetrative power. Used in conjunction with Ena's eyes, instincts and archery.

The full-powered arrow bearing all these factors, struck down the white light.

The arrowhead penetrated soft flesh... Ena was certain.

The expert's instincts proved to be correct. The flight of the white light was interrupted.

The light immediately vanished to reveal the figure of Witch Queen Guinevere, who began falling naturally. In that case, she would fall into the sea or onto the surface of the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway.

However, the rate of her fall suddenly slowed down.

Slowly and wavering, like the descent of a leaf, she was using hovering magic.

The Divine Ancestor's left arm... The upper arm region showed a laceration.

In addition, her child-like beautiful face was flushed red from undisguised anger. Even so, her face was still as beautiful as an antique doll's.

"Not a critical hit... It can't be helped since she was flying at such speeds."

The blonde Divine Ancestor made her landing a couple dozens of meters ahead on the road.

Ena threw the bow and quiver aside. The greeting had been sent and it was now time for the weapons to enter the stage.

She had to prevent Guinevere from advancing. This was the mission entrusted to her by the man she loved.

Part 4

"I know all about you. Miko blessed with divine manifestation."

Did she calm her rage as soon as she landed on the ground?

Guinevere's beautiful face was now as calm as a windless lake.

"Obstructing the most authoritative Divine Ancestor, Witch Queen Guinevere. What an audacious girl. The price exacted for such insolence shall be your very life."

In outer form, she appeared even younger than Ena. However, there existed a vast difference in mastery of magic and sheer magical power between them.

Nevertheless, the Hime-Miko of the Sword was undaunted, charging straight at Divine Ancestor Guinevere.

"I don't know if you are bluffing — but Ena is not one to sit around waiting for death."

Ena retorted with determination. Having abandoned the bow, she was unarmed.

Not even her usual Japanese sword was present. But that was because she had already prepared a substitute weapon.

"Yamato Yamato, elite of the nation, endless rolling green mountains, encircled by the walls of the summit, beautiful Yamato! "

Spell words chanted in order to use the trump card.

Then she imagined. The partner whose form was a sword. The new bonds forged last night —

Divine possession began. This time it was not the presence bestowed by the guardian god Susanoo but a divine aura closer to this partner here.

"Beseeching the grace of Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi! May its shadow manifest hither!"

The magnificent three-foot three-and-a-half-inch blade suddenly manifested in Ena's hand as she called out.

The jet-black blade whose form followed a gentle curve, forged into a structure of Japanese style. This was the Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi that inhabited Kusanagi Godou's right arm. Unlike before, this was not temporarily borrowed.

The divine aura of Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi had been summoned from Kusanagi Godou's right arm and materialized in the form of a sword.

This could be said to be Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi's doppelganger. Another divine blade.

"Well... How splendid. Summoning the power of gods immediately!"

Even so, Guinevere continued to smile.

The divine possessed Hime-Miko of the Sword should be on the same level as Divine Ancestors and divine beasts.

Ena wielded Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi's divine aura as she held her breath and focused.

"Hey, did you know? Even though they are known as Hime-Miko in this country, this kind of power originates from the bloodline of the Divine Ancestors, the same kin as me, Guinevere. Yes yes, you are one of our very distant descendants."

The Witch Queen's melodic voice spoke softly, as she laughed with an expression of child-like innocence.

"It would be most vexing to think that a distant descendant can do something we Divine Ancestors could not. Be that as it may, Guinevere happens to be unable to use possession type spells—"

In that instant, the divine aura in Ena's surroundings increased explosively.

Not from Guinevere herself but somewhere else... Over there! Ena cast her gaze towards the vast sea of Bousou beyond the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway.

"However, I can still manage similar spells. I beseech you to come hither, servant dispatched by the god of the sea! Fight for Guinevere!"

Shyaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!

There was the sound of a great volume of seawater pushed forth onto land.

Ena remained silent despite the rising tension of facing this sea-splitting might.

Even though its full appearance was not visible, the head of the giant squid suggested a full length of maybe thirty or forty meters —

The giant squid's various tentacles began reaching out from the sea.

"Wohohoho. The water and the earth's divine aura are also considered Guinevere's kin. With a little time and preparation, they can be made to manifest in the form of divine beasts. Even

though it's simply an imitation of the divine, formed using the Holy Grail's magical power... However, even something on the level of a fake god can be manifested."

Ena was astonished at the revelations of Guinevere's confident speech.

Having obtained divine might, she understood that a divine beast lay before her. Even though her divine possession was rather game-breaking, her opponent was even more extreme.

No matter what, even assisted by divine power, Seishuuin Ena was just a living human girl.

Her opponent had the gigantic body of a divine beast. The difference in power and body size was overwhelming.

"That's appearing too suddenly, come on!"

An enormous squid tentacle attacked from overhead.

Crash! The speed and curvature was like a giant whip's.

Ena jumped away as quickly as a monkey. Very few people could surpass the agility of the Hime-Miko of the Sword.

With an appropriate margin of safety, she evaded the squid's tentacle.

The giant organism's appendage struck the highway surface where Ena had been standing — directly shattering it. Steel reinforced concrete crumbled noisily, breaking apart, dug upon by the squid's tentacle. It seemed as easy as slicing through a cake.

Furthermore, the giant squid still had many other tentacles.

The gigantic tentacles repeatedly attacked Ena on land.

Tentacles descending on her from above. Tentacles sweeping from behind. From the right and left, tentacles trying to entangle her.

"Rather alert of you! However, please do not forget the existence of Guinevere!"

Ena smacked her lips. The giant squid (more elegantly known as the Kraken) was wrecking the road using dozens of tentacles.

The road surface was pulverized and torn into a mess.

Concrete fragments of various shapes and sizes were rolling about all over the road.

Cars probably could not be driven over this road any more. Even walking would be difficult. Had Ena not been agile enough to jump around in this place, it would have been impossible to evade all of the Kraken's attacks.

At this time, the next challenge arrived.

Guinevere who had hovered into the air at some point was now holding a javelin in her hand.

"O Witch's javelin guarding the country of shadows, relive the legend of Queen Scáthach!"[34]

Chanting the spell words, the Divine Ancestor launched the javelin.

A weakly throw that neglected to make use of the waist. She must be untrained in martial arts.

Nevertheless, such a throw was more than enough. As the javelin automatically flew towards Ena, the magical weapon had split itself into twelve short spears hurtling towards their target.

Ena gave up trying to defend.

Using her reflexes to guard against the Kraken's attacks, she entrusted herself to Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi!

Relaxing her arms as she gripped the divine sword, she allowed it to move autonomously.

Flash. Two flashes. Three flashes. As the lustrous blade endlessly flashed back and forth, Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi repeatedly struck down the onslaught of magic javelins.

All were cut down. The steel partner defended Ena most splendidly.

At that moment the concrete beneath her shattered.

Somehow, the Kraken had dug one of its tentacles into the ground, preparing for an attack from below.

Even so, Ena managed to retreat backwards with all her effort and evaded the massive tentacle.

However, the second and third tentacles continued to rip apart the concrete beneath her, repeatedly attacking from underground. Ena leaped around as if she was flying, desperately trying to escape.

Guinevere once again threw the javelin from just now, this time launching two at the same time.

Splitting apart once again, a total of twenty-four short spears rained down.

—I rely on you, Ama no Murakumo!

Responding to her prayer, Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi once again defended with a flurry of strikes. Nevertheless.

Guooooooooooooooooooh!!

A terrifying shriek. Even though it was unclear what kind of organ produced such a sound, it was the howl of the Kraken.

In the instant she heard this sound, Ena's entire body froze.

Tightly constricted by the spirit powers of the divine beast, she could not even lift a finger.

Normally, divine possessed Ena would have used Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi to slice it apart. However, her preoccupation with offense had shown an opening!

"In case I had to take you on as an opponent... Even though I did warn myself, was it redundant concern?"

Guinevere remarked boldly as she prepared the third launch of the javelin.

Since Ena had entrusted her defense to Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi, her body was unable to move.

In that case, let me fully liberate Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi's power — just as Ena started concentrating.

"Behold! As an adamant harder than flint have I made thy forehead! Fear them not, neither be dismayed at their looks, though they be a rebellious house!"[35]

The familiar and wondrous voice chanted spell words of iron.

A wall suddenly appeared before Ena. Like a thick panel of steel, it was impenetrable as a literal iron wall, deflecting the spears completely.

"I finally made it to the most spectacular scene. Fortune must be smiling upon my usual abundance of good deeds."

His Majesty would likely retort to such a comment.

The girl, who could hardly be described as virtuous in conduct, approached as Ena smiled wryly.

Crowned by her red-tinted blonde hair fluttering in the wind, her beautiful face shone with the light of dazzling talent and domineering spirit.

Her surcoat was designed with red vertical stripes against a black background.

The beautiful girl synonymous to red and black. It was Erica Blandelli of course.

Part 5

"No need to explain the situation. I've already heard the main gist from Godou. I think I can imagine the rest from the current circumstances."

Appearing majestically, Erica held a great broad sword in her hand.

This was the true form of the magic sword Cuore di Leone. Held in her other hand was a rhombic shield.

Ena asked her unexpected savior:

"Erica-san, weren't you unable to return immediately?"

"Yes. But fortunately, I was able to obtain permission to return soon after Godou's call. Then I went to the airport, praying that the flight to Japan had not been cancelled."

Erica spoke elegantly as usual.

However, this leisurely confidence made Ena even more certain.

"The way you speak sounds a bit like Kaoru-san. Surely there was no 'praying' like you said."

"How could that be? I am bound to a knight's honor with a clean conscience. Rather, Ena-san must have spent too much time with such a duplicitous person, for you to be unable to believe in other people's good fortune..."

Having spoken with composure, Erica turned her gaze towards the sky.

Witch Queen Guinevere. Moreover, the divine beast Kraken whose head had surfaced was still waiting ready behind her.

Even though a normal squid only had ten tentacles, this creature actually had twenty or thirty of these appendages.

Those massive tentacles were like sea serpents, wriggling nonstop along the surface of the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway and craning their scythe-like necks.

The terrifyingly white tentacles were densely covered with numerous suction cups. It was a sight that created great dissonance against Guinevere's antique doll-like beauty.

"Allow me to formally introduce myself to you, witch amongst witches. Meeting you here is an honor for me, the Knight Erica Blandelli. I've heard plenty about your exploits as Black Prince Alec's enemy."

"Well. It is rare for people to know of Guinevere's cordial relations with the Black Prince."

The blonde knight gracefully performed a knight's greeting.

She showed a lady-like smile to the hovering beauty in the black dress.

Ignoring the strange setting, they were like a courtly pair of characters taken out from medieval chivalric romance literature.

"Not only valorous but also versed in etiquette, and very resourceful too! Hohoho, clever knight, I also know about you. Indeed, you are Kusanagi-sama's direct vassal."

"To be acknowledged by Guinevere-sama is truly an unexpected joy."

The conversation was like mutual echoing.

Ena began to get impatient. Even though Erica was speaking very gracefully, her true nature was unbearably arrogant. What

conniving ways. Furthermore, something about Erica made Ena wary —

Erica Blandelli was back after a long absence.

For the undisputed premier Hime-Miko, Seishuuin Ena, Erica was her first true opponent. Most likely, they will continue being rivals for the rest of their lives.

In the past, Ena did not sense Erica holding back on a hidden trump card.

Purely in terms of dormant potential, even the prodigy Erica could not match a user of divine possession.

That was what Ena had always thought. However, what about now? And henceforth? Somehow, Ena's instincts were warning her .

"Hohoho. It's been so long since I had a chance to converse with a knight who knows how to treat a lady properly. This should have been an occasion to savor and enjoy, but very unfortunately, Guinevere is in a hurry to find out what happened between Kusanagi-sama and Athena. It's about time for things to conclude here."

Guinevere smiled as she hovered in the air.

The conversation was the only thing courteous. The original tense atmosphere had not changed at all.

Erica readied her magic sword and prepared for battle. Ena also gripped Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi firmly once more.

"Hey Erica-san... Could you let me handle this alone?"

"Oh my, Ena-san, you want a one on one duel? Even though that kind of knightly style is my preference, the current situation can only accommodate two versus two."

The Hime-Miko and the Great Knight stood shoulder to shoulder, facing their opponents.

Divine Ancestor Guinevere and divine beast Kraken. Despite the massive disparity in outward beauty, both belonged to the divine realm. No amount of martial arts or magical mastery could surpass these formidable foes.

"Yes. Ena can see that. But fighting in this messy battle isn't a solution either — rather, the tide will gradually turn against us. Because of that, could you please let Ena go on a rampage first, then I will rely on Erica-san for the rest."

"Debating technique aside, I think Ena-san should really learn a little rhetoric."

This abstract manner of speech expressed disagreement. However.

"Well. I, Erica Blandelli, have also been blessed by fortune with the talent of adaptability. Do as you wish. Show me what you can do."

"Thanks. It really helps. — Well then, I'll be in your care!"

In the instant she obtained Erica's favorable answer, Ena began to run.

Running at full speed towards the Divine Ancestor and the divine beast. Summoning even more of Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi's divine aura. Despite having already reached the limits of control, she continued to summon more.

The Kraken swung its massive tentacles at Ena.

Guinevere also intended to throw the javelin as before.

But Ena could not feel anything. She will leave things to the body and the partner who should be able to sweep all obstacles away!

...From this moment on, Ena's consciousness began to fade.

In contrast, the body running at full speed became even more alert. Compared to before, it was more sensitive and vigorous.

Moving with beast-like savagery, leaping, evading the Kraken's tentacles. Stepping on it, jumping further. Agilely dodging Guinevere's rain of magical spears along the way.

The body was not the only thing performing vigorously.

The divine sword, Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi, also moved freely in a flurry, back and forth endlessly.

Those terrifying sucker-bearing tentacles of the Kraken — impossible to discern in number how many dozens there were.

The sacred jet-black blade continually thrust itself at them. Slicing them apart, severing them.

Guinevere's javelins also met the same fate. As soon as they neared the sword, they were instantly sliced to pieces.

The Kraken roared painfully using some unknown organ.

Guinevere's face began twitching from shock.

Completely ignoring these sights and sounds, Seishuuin Ena's body continued jumping around with the divine sword.

It felt as if her consciousness was staring blankly down from the sky. Like watching someone else. Clearly abnormal.

Rampage. Seishuuin Ena was intentionally allowing her divine possession to rampage out of control.

Even though she entered this state last time to overpower Erica, it had been an accident. This time, she deliberately caused herself to become like this. She believed that the best way to defeat the combination of divine beast and Divine Ancestor was to rely on rampaging explosive power.

With too many uncertainties, it was a final desperate ploy that could not be used lightly.

However, Ena let herself go out of control without hesitation because she believed she could entrust the aftermath to Erica. In that case, how would their opponents react?

Erica distanced herself from the rampaging Hime-Miko and carefully watched the battle develop.

That's right, well done. Leave on your own.

In their current state, Ena and Ama no Murakumo had no confidence whether they could distinguish friend from foe. It was correct for Erica to stand back and keep an eye on the situation, ready to seize any opportunities. Erica-san was really smart as expected—

As her mind contemplated, Ena's body was already beginning its last rampage.

The limit should be fast approaching. In that case, the body will soon crash down like a kite with a severed string. If only she could make it in time...

Her consciousness wishing in a daze, Ena's body ran towards the sea.

And jumped as hard as she could, off the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway.

Towards the head of the Kraken exposed above the sea surface. Aiming for the body rather than the tentacles.

Ena flew, her body so light that it could have jumped over eight ships.

Heading in a straight line, she thrust Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi forwards. Just like that, the jet-black blade struck the squid's head with a violent impact, piercing right through. Unable to stop her, the Kraken roared.

Guaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!

The divine beast immediately caused the sea surface to rise, trying with all its might to create a defensive wall of seawater. It was attempting to send Ena and her attack flying back!

However, the instant Ama no Murakumo's bladed edge made contact with the wall of seawater...

The wall's material, the seawater instantly split open and lost form. With series of splashes, the water fell back into the original sea. Still flying, Ena stabbed the divine blade into the Kraken's face .

Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!! The final cries of death.

Struck by a full-powered blow, the giant squid turned back into a massive volume of water with a bone-chilling shriek. With crashing and splashing noises, it split apart and returned to the sea , creating massive waves.

However, having obtained victory, Ena's body also fell into the water.

Am I going to... drown? As Ena's consciousness wondered, Erica sprang into action.

"Unbelievable. Such utter recklessness, making things so troublesome!"

Turning Cuore di Leone into a lock and chain, she cast it out. Splendidly, the lock and chain tangled itself around Ena' right leg.

Pulling the undulating chain, Erica dragged Ena's body back onto the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway.

Ena's consciousness returned at this time. Finally, she had reached her limit.

"Guhooh... Guwah!"

Regaining her senses, Ena knelt by Erica's feet, vomiting blood.

Her entire body felt as heavy as lead. Exhausted to the absolute limit. After using divine possession for two days in a row, the feedback struck her all at once.

"Seems like I'm out... So as I requested just now, I leave things to you..."

"You're hopeless. Go on and feel gratified. It's quite rare for me to support anyone apart from Godou and Lily."

Ena smiled at Erica's answer.

Even though this rival was so conceited, at the same time, she was also extremely generous.

"Basically, Guinevere's concerns proved to be correct."

Hovering in midair through magic, Guinevere softly whispered.

Despite the defeat of the divine beast before her, the beautiful girl's face was not shrouded in gloom.

"This reminds me of ancient berserkers and their superb battle forms. I never would have expected my kin to be defeated in this manner. What a scary child...!"

Guinevere smiled.

The child-like beautiful face was infused with the Witch Queen's solemn aloofness.

"As befits one who serves a god-slayer. Far surpassing normal humans. If that is the case, Guinevere will use the final move. Sir Knight, come heed Guinevere's summons!"

The shouts of the lovely voice reached high into the sky.

Immediately, the sunny sky turned black with clouds and lightning descended.

Or rather, a man and horse descended from the sky, clad in lightning. A white divine horse together with a knight in white armor. This was not a divine beast but a [Heretic God]!

The white rider and horse descended next to Guinevere, hovering calmly in midair.

"Guinevere needs to take care of these people, Sir Knight. May I ask that you go forth to Athena and Kusanagi-sama's side?"

"Hmm. It will be tough to handle."

From the white knight's helmet came a very manly and beautiful voice. Even though his actual face could not be seen, one inevitably felt that he must be either a cool or an awe-inspiring man.

"Most unfortunate. Hence, Sir Knight, please take this."

A short pewter staff suddenly appeared in Guinevere's hand.

Its tip was done in silverwork to resemble a twin-headed snake. The white knight casually received the snake staff without paying particular attention.

"Hmm. All shall be done in accordance to your will."

"May victory smile upon you, Lancelot du Lac!"

Nodding at the farewell, the white god was enveloped in lightning.

He flew straight in that manner, towards the beach where Athena and Godou were located.

Ena was unable to take a single step, but even in peak condition she would not have been able to intercept him.

True lightning flying across the sky was most likely impossible for Ena's arrows to strike down.

"Knight of the Lake, Sir Lancelot... There have been rumors that he secretly protects Guinevere-sama, but clearly it is no longer anything secret..."

On the other hand, Erica stood in surprise beside Ena.

Thus, Guinevere turned around and smiled with child-like innocence towards the ground.

"Hoho. You seem to be on amicable terms with Princess Alice. Yes, in order not to repeat the same mistake as when I lost to His

Highness the Black Prince, I now made Sir Knight manifest as a heretic god."

For the Witch Queen to be able to recruit a war god of steel, even Ena the optimist was extremely shocked.

"I could have asked Sir Knight to eliminate you all in an instant, but making such a rude request to the unparalleled war god is not permitted. So let Guinevere personally send you to your graves!"

As Guinevere yelled out, her body released intense magical power.

'Divine essence of the water. I beseech you to hurry forth to Guinevere and once again respond to the prayers of the Witch Queen, reveal your sacred form!"

Divine essence once again surged, causing the sea to rise. But this time it was not the Kraken.

Appearing forth was a white-colored water dragon.

A ferocious head like a carnivorous dinosaur and a long slender body like a gigantic serpent. From its back grew bat-like wings. Its two front legs resembled a lizard's. A strange looking chimera —

Raising its head and torso up from the sea, the sea dragon roared.

Ooooooooooooooooooooh!! The roaring sound created wind.

Violent gusts of wind blew across the surrounding sea and the surface of the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway. It was so strong that Erica and Ena felt like they were about to be blown away.

"Come! Attack together with Guinevere and devour these children with your jaws!"

The Witch Queen disappeared, her slender body absorbed into the water dragon's chest. Divine Ancestor Guinevere was assimilated into the several-dozen-meter-long white dragon.

"Could it be possible, she released the seal of the dragons and snakes!?"

"Don't think so... That's still a divine beast!"

As the female knight wondered with a paled expression, Ena replied softly.

Erica proceeded to gaze sharply at the water dragon's massive body, and murmured to herself:

"Really... In that case, perhaps this could finally be used."

Erica's words. As expected. Ena nodded at her correct suspicions.

Back when Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi was rampaging out of control at Chidorigafuchi, and also in the battle against the Great Sage Equaling Heaven, Erica had received Verethragna's protection, allowing her to face off against Ena and the Great Sage.

But now she no longer had that protection. She must fight her way out of this situation with her own power.

"—Finally be used is not good enough. The crisis must be overcome no matter what, Erica."

A sudden voice called out.

It was a voice not heard for a day, that of the awe-inspiring female knight. Ena immediately glanced in its direction.

She must have entered from the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway, near the Kisarazu junction entrance. They had finally arrived.

"In order to obtain that mystical ritual, you took that lazy break that the school acquiesced to. If you do not show the results properly, all your unruliness would become meaningless!"

"Well said, Lily."

Erica chuckled at Liliana Kranjcar's statement.

The petrified female knight most likely revived slightly more than ten minutes earlier, asked about the situation and rushed here immediately. She must have deemed it more urgent to support Ena first instead of her lord.

"Hoping to be entrusted with the duty of aiding Godou, Lily was smiling so happily back then. In any case, you must have been fulfilling your desires while I was away."

"Ugh, stop talking nonsense!"

Wearing her blue and black cape, Liliana objected with a shout as her face began to twitch.

Having summoned the magic sword Il Maestro in its glaive form, she was clearly entering this battle with caution.

"Actually I originally planned to go along and read that book. But then I was thinking I could not take time off to leave Kusanagi Godou's side, it could not be helped...!"

"Ena-san! Did you overuse divine possession!? Y-You need immediate treatment...!"

Ignoring the knight's anxiety, another member of the reinforcements had spoken.

It was Mariya Yuri dressed in her miko outfit. Due to the divine beast's rampage, the road was full of debris, and Yuri slowly and painfully made her way near.

Kneeling down and gently caressing Ena's back, she nodded to Erica.

"It is fine, Erica-san. Your new power — as long as it can be controlled well, it should be a trump card that stands on equal ground with divine possession."

"Thank you, Yuri. Your encouragement is truly inspiring."

Erica displayed a glamorous smile towards the Hime-Miko who most likely received an oracle through spirit vision.

"Well, the most important issue is 'control' as mentioned, but there is no choice but to proceed onwards at this juncture. Everyone, let the sight of Erica Blandelli's mighty style be branded upon your eyes! I shall defeat Divine Ancestor Guinevere here and now!"

Sonorously delivering her declaration, the red knight approached the deadly and ferocious water dragon.

Part 6

Erica and Lily had learned the spell words of David from the grimoire, "Book in Praise of David's Great Works."

However, that was not all they had learned.

The spell words of smiting. Ultimate battle magic crowned with David's great name, and said to bestow the user with the [Sacred Privilege of Extermination] on the level of divine beasts and spirits —

Back when they sneaked a peek at the original edition grimoire guarded by Saint Raffaello, Salvatore Doni's master, Erica and Liliana had tried as much as they could to memorize this portion of the mystic arts. However, the descriptions were extremely voluminous. Despite their great intellect, the two girls' memories were limited.

Erica had tried her best to memorize the portion of [Jericho's Extermination] while Liliana had committed [Midian's Extermination] to memory. Other than that, there was still all sorts of other knowledge.

—Conversely, for the two girls to be able to identify all the magical key points in such short time, was testament to their genius intellect and disposition to magic...

In any case, by their good fortune, two mystical techniques had been acquired.

Erica studied them whenever she had a chance. Same for Liliana .

Several years later, the two had mastered the spell words of David. Secret techniques that could even cause damage to gods. However, actual combat experience later taught them it was virtually impossible to defeat a god with these techniques without substantially miraculous circumstances.

Furthermore, Erica and Liliana were still unable to use the spell words of smiting.

Learning this secret rite required paladino-level mastery of martial arts and magic.

The only known users were Saint Raffaello, Erica's uncle Paolo Blandelli, and Black Prince Alec's trusted subordinate Sir Iceman. Knights who were equivalent to living legends.

Even though Erica and Liliana were prodigies, these were not techniques that could be easily used by knights in training.

However, in the battle against the Great Sage Equaling Heaven —

Bestowed with Verethragna's protection, the two girls had successfully used incomplete spell words of smiting.

Precisely because of that, they reached a revelation. This spell was still inadequate for taking on gods head on. On the other hand , it was an effective counter to their servants, the divine beasts.

Kusanagi Godou's battles in the future will only get even more harsh and intense.

In order to be able to assist meaningfully, they needed to master the spell words of smiting as quickly as possible. Furthermore, the two knights would be left in the dust by their rivals if they did not do so.

"Even though it's a slightly unpleasant topic, let's exchange opinions without reservation."

Three weeks ago, Erica had proposed to Liliana.

Inviting her childhood friend and rival to a cafe on Hongou street, Erica chatted with Liliana over coffee.

"Even though we've trained as much as Ena-san, her theophany is far too extraordinary. In the context of Europe, using that technique would put her amongst the ranks of the paladino... Unique existences like Esteemed Uncle and Saint Raffaello."

"Yes. I have no wish to admit it, but that is indeed the truth."

Liliana was nodding with a frown.

In European magic, divine possession was classed as theophany . However, no known user had been born in the past three hundred years. That was the kind of outstanding and rare talent shown by Ena's complete mastery of this mystic technique.

Neither the red nor the blue knights wanted to admit defeat.

But they were not the foolish type that disparaged others for such reasons.

"It's not too conspicuous, but Mariya Yuri's potential is also quite amazing."

"Yes. That child possesses spirit powers of the same nature as Princess Alice."

This was confirmed during the time when she received Verethragna's protection.

At the time, Yuri was in command of spirit vision and psychic sensing powers that even surpassed the White Miko-Hime.

"I don't think she can reach the Princess' level in the future, but it is truly remarkable how Yuri resembled the legendary peerless miko. By the way, the young master of Hong Kong's Lu family also seems to be hanging around Godou recently."

Erica recalled the eccentric but promising young star.

Although he could be considered the same generation, Lu Yinghua still resembled a child who had not grown up. But sooner or later, he would become a young man powerful enough to surpass Erica and Liliana.

Most probably, his god-slayer master will also teach him many secret techniques.

Purely in terms of martial arts, it was highly likely that his progress will leave them in the dust.

"I sought you, Lily, to discuss our common understanding of the increase in troublesome rivals. Don't you think it's about time we get promoted to the rank of paladino?"

The red and blue knights both secretly harbored this common goal.

The two had contacted friends in Europe to aid in collecting intelligence.

Four years ago, Salvatore Doni was apparently entrusted with keeping the "Book in Praise of David's Great Works." After tracking it down, they deduced that the current curator was

Andrea Rivera. After investigating the scheduled movements of Doni and his attendant, they discussed how to come up with a plausible excuse to read the book —

It stood to reason that the two of them would go read the grimoire together.

However, they believed Kusanagi Godou needed supervision. Were they to avert their gaze for a moment, he could very likely get into another fight with a god, or get intimate with a new girl.

Hence they concluded they had to avoid situations where Godou was neither supervised nor guarded.

In the end, they decided Erica would go to Italy while Liliana stayed behind.

The two made a promise to bring back a copy of the grimoire's essential passages. Of course, this was a promise that one could easily go back on.

Nevertheless, Liliana still let Erica go instead of her —

As much as the silver-haired long time friend did not wish to admit, the two of them had developed a trusting relationship over the decade-plus they had known each other. No matter what, the two were childhood friends bound by ill fate.

Permission to read was obtained from Salvatore one week ago.

After copying the grimoire, Erica returned to her family home in Milan to receive instruction from her uncle, a current user of the spell words of smiting.

She studied intensely as she received guidance from the great predecessor.

Special training that only lasted a week. But this was no crash course. In the past four years, Erica had continually trained in the mystic ritual secretly. Now that she had a chance to study the grimoire in detail, combined with the guidance of an excellent teacher, Erica's mastery was instantly bolstered. That said, this was a mystic ritual of the highest difficulty.

Erica's spell words of smiting were still incomplete when she received news that Athena had returned.

This prompted her to find a way to persuade her uncle who had forbidden her to leave without mastering the technique. This was the extent of Erica's recent exploits in Japan and Italy.

"What a guy who loves making trouble for others —!

Erica complained as a smile surfaced on her face.

This time the enemy was Athena. And a Divine Ancestor as well.

But were things any different, he would not be the youth that Erica Blandelli loved. Because he was the born warrior, always accompanied by strife at all times.

Erica ran alone as quickly as the wind across the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway.

Her intent was to draw the enemy away from Ena who was exhausted, Yuri who could not fight, as well as Liliana.

The water dragon, which had assimilated Guinevere, flew after Erica.

Low altitude flying. It was at the height and distance such that a swipe from its front claws could tear Erica apart. However, the dragon did not make its first attack in that manner.

The white water dragon opened its gaping jaws and exhaled. This was no ordinary breath.

Freezing wind carrying innumerable shards of ice. Any creature devoured by this wind would be cruelly sliced apart and instantly frozen into ice.

Deadly magical wind indeed. The breath of a terrifying dragon.

A direct hit would be critical. Erica stopped running and began to chant spell words.

This was no ordinary magic but the spell words of smiting, of course.

"And seven priests bearing seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark of the Lord went on continually, and blew with the trumpets: and the armed men went before them!"[36]

Erica's body shone with sacred red light.

This light protected Erica, blocking the breath of ice. However, it still felt exceptionally cold. Even though it managed to defend against the shards of ice, the icy cold air still penetrated and invaded the sacred light.

Erica's body was about to be frozen.

The chilly air not only made the bones tremble, it was cold enough to freeze the bones. In spite of that, Erica gritted her teeth and continued to chant.

"They compassed the city seven times. And it came to pass at the seventh time, when the priests blew with the trumpets, Joshua said unto the people, Shout; for the Lord hath given you the city —"[37]

Moreover, the water dragon's front limb was descending.

Four claws were on the paw, each as long and sharp as a sword.

Erica took Cuore di Leone which had been restored to its broad-bladed form together with her shield and blocked the sharp claws. Her breathing quickened as her concentration was almost disrupted.

Performing close quarter combat at the same time as using the spell words of smiting proved to be extremely difficult after all.

"And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword."[38]

But Erica did not stop chanting.

Had there not been any disturbance, she would be able to use the spell words of smiting all at once—

But if it was a spell that could not be completed without exposing herself defenseless, then it would be worthless in actual combat. Hence, Erica brandished her sword and shield desperately .

"Cursed before the Lord is the one who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho: At the cost of his firstborn son he will lay its foundations; at the cost of his youngest he will set up its gates."[39]

The spell words obtained from the book of David —

Erica's chant was complete.

Erica defended against the water dragon's breath and claws, the occasional swipes from the long tail, the jaws densely lined with sharp teeth, and charging impacts.

Then there was magical power. In order to unleash smiting, all of Erica's magical power had to be put forth.

However, was she able to do that at the same time as she handled these fierce attacks?

During the battle against the Great Sage, she had much more magical power at her disposal thanks to Verethragna's protection. But now was different. Nevertheless, she still had to —!

"Moreover, it's probably about time for reinforcements..."

Erica spoke softly as if encouraging herself.

Furthermore, she smiled as she anticipated the arrival of the arrow of blue light.

It was for this express reason that Erica had distanced herself from the rest of the girls. In order to wipe the other knight's existence from the Divine Ancestor's awareness.

"People, listen to David's song of mourning! How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war perished!"[40]

Liliana chanted spell words as she watched Erica's desperate battle from afar.

She had expected this all along. That mystic rite could not have been mastered within a single week — Liliana shrugged helplessly at her rival and long time friend's bluffing.

"From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan turned not back, and the sword of Saul returned not empty!"[41]

One hundred meters ahead on the road surface of the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway.

Enveloped in red light, Erica swung her sword, bearing her shield. The white water dragon attacked from midair, blowing its tempestuous and icy breath, flashing its claws and teeth.

The weapon that Liliana chose for this moment, was *that one* naturally.

"O Bow of Jonathan, the warrior's weapon fast as an eagle and strong as a lion. Come forth to my hand immediately!"

The bow and arrows composed of blue light.

Manifested in Liliana's hands were the weapons that could even cause injury to gods. And of course it was applicable to divine beasts as well! Just as Liliana closed one eye and was planning to aim at her target...

"Ena-san, you cannot move yet!"

"It's okay... But if I need to use the sword again, I will be relying on Yuri..."

Yuri was trying to persuade Ena as she tried to stand up, using Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi as a crutch.

The Hime-Miko was trying her hardest to cast recovery magic on the divine sword user who had exhausted her strength.

This was not a spell for healing external wounds but one for healing internal injuries. There were also quite a few types of recovery magic which temporarily restored lost strength.

Repeated use of divine possession would eat away at the user's life.

Liliana recalled what Ena had told her before. Yuri surely understood the frightening toll Ena's body had taken from using divine possession two days in a row and even going berserk.

"Lilana-san... If it's just one strike, Ena can still do it, barely."

"If that is the case, then get it over with quickly and meet up with Kusanagi Godou. There is no time to dally."

Knowing it was useless to try stopping her, Liliana readied her bow and arrows once again.

The target was the water dragon in the distance that was giving Erica a hard time. Two arrows of light should be sufficient for cover — no, this was an attack meant to strike on target. Liliana shot the two arrows with determination.

Ena also launched Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi as if throwing a javelin.

An ordinary sword could not have been used in this manner, but thanks to some mysterious blessing, the legendary sword flew straight as an arrow.

Liliana had fired the Bow of Jonathan. Plus there was Ena's Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi.

The white water dragon that had been tormenting Erica became aware of these attacks and conjured defensive magic. A pattern of white light appeared before the water dragon, blocking the blue arrows. Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi was also deflected by a swipe of the dragon's tail.

These were not martial techniques that ordinary divine beasts could use.

As befitted the dragon inhabited by a Divine Ancestor. Erica smiled bravely as she admired the sight.

This was the lioness' smile, certain in victory.

Even though she had not expected the attacks just now to be defended, Erica could not give the opponent any respite.

Deeply — She drew in a deep breath.

Erica let this breath diffuse throughout her body. All her cells began to produce scorching heat as if incinerating. This was magical power, producing strength that concentrated in the body's centre. In oriental medicine, this spot would be the *dantian* below the navel. In terms of chakra, this would be the Swadhisthana.

Then she made it explode.

In the instant of activation, all magical power was poured into the mystic rite.

Guinevere had shown a slight opening as a result. This became the final step for completing the smiting...!

"Soldiers! Now is the moment to blow the horns at Jericho!"

Spell words were promptly added to facilitate the technique's activation.

Smiting — the [Sacred Privilege of Extermination] inhabiting Erica. From her body came red light that turned into physical force that sent the white dragon flying.

"What!? How could this be possible—!"

"Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Roaring sounds and Guinevere's voice came out of the dragon's mouth simultaneously. She was shocked to be suddenly repelled by the red light.

Ignoring these noises, Erica manifested the Privilege of Extermination into a visible form.

Armor. First of all, her upper torso was wrapped in chain mail. Next there were the breastplate and pauldrons with the dull color of steel. There were also sturdy gauntlets and greaves.

Covering up Erica Blandelli's beautiful face on the battlefield would probably be classified as a crime. Consequently, this form

was chosen. Applying the Privilege of Extermination to the sword and the shield, Erica's armaments were complete.

"Fear not, tremble not! Leading all the warriors, go attack the city!"

Erica released the spell words and flew into the sky.

Flying instead of leaping. The Sacred Exterminator was granted the ability of brief flight.

Erica instantly flew up a hundred meters and looked down. The water dragon carrying Guinevere had spread its wings, intending to take off in flight.

Trying its hardest to pursue and attack. But it was too late.

"I hereby display the heart of the lion! Hence all knights shall fear me, singing praises unto me!"

The heart of the lion implied indomitable courage.

Using these spell words as a trigger, Erica was shining with red light as she charged downwards in descent. Like the constellation of Leo, descending from the heavens, attacking —!

Crashing violently into the white dragon, the enemy's massive body was blown away.

Aiming at the throat, the sword was thrust. Slice, slice, slice, slice!

"Guh... What savagery! Looks like a retreat might be in order!"

"Gwoooooooooooooooooooooooooh!!"

As Guinevere yelled out, refusing to admit defeat, the dragon gave off mournful death cries.

Like the Kraken before, the divine beast's body reverted to water and collapsed. At the same time, a white light flew out of its body, up towards the sky.

Guinevere had fled — But Erica did not have any remaining strength to pursue her.

Exhaling deeply, she watched the white witch flying in the sky. At the same time, the mystic rite had also ended. Both the red light and the armor had vanished while fatigue and exhaustion swept across her entire body.

Her mind also felt dazed and unable to think properly.

Apart from when rising out of bed, who could have thought there existed other circumstances that could lower Erica's intellect?

"This counts as a pass for today, but more training is definitely needed..."

Erica shook her head as she murmured to herself.

Reportedly, her uncle Paolo Blandelli had used the same attack to crush the ancient city of Lancaster. Furthermore, a mere day after using the Sacred Exterminator's form, he achieved the legendary feat of liberating the sleeping Princess Alice who was under the guard of six divine beasts unleashed by the Three Furies, the Erinyes.

As his successor, Erica could not lag behind.

Nevertheless, the current priority was to catch up to Kusanagi Godou. Erica endured the torments of her exhausted body and resolutely walked towards her companions.

But every step proved to be most taxing.

Be that as it may, Erica could not expose her weakness when all eyes were watching. After all, Erica Blandelli was glamorously graceful and beautifully radiant at all times!

Chapter 7 - Farewell My Mortal Enemy

Part 1

"Ho... Thy vassal apparently clasheth with that man's maidservant."

Alone on this beach, just the two of them. Athena suddenly smiled.

Indicating that her duel with Kusanagi was about to begin.

"Maidservant? You mean Guinevere?"

"She hath a name like that? She is the witch of the ancient matriarch deity, the inheritor of the Holy Grail."

In response to Godou's question, she gave a proper answer.

Athena was probably using some kind of clairvoyance to spy on Guinevere's whereabouts. She probably wanted to guard against rude interlopers from intruding on their fight.

Godou had expressly ordered Ama no Murakumo to inform him if the other partner ran into any danger.

He had also reminded Ena to call the name of Kusanagi Godou in case of a desperate situation, so that the [Wind] incarnation could be used to save them. Currently, neither of them had given any notice.

Ena seemed to have put forth all her efforts to halt Guinevere's advance.

"Isn't calling her 'maidservant' going a bit too far? Besides, who do you mean by 'that man'?"

"He is the hero who standeth as the mortal enemy of god-slayers. One knoweth not where he lieth. Be that as it may, he apparently sleepeth somewhere on this island."

"...Could it be that guy, the strongest [Steel]?"

Godou recalled what he heard before from that old bunch.

"Thou knowest? From that earlier attack, thou seemest to have matured well."

"That's not maturing, it's called 'stepping deeper into the puddle .' Anyway, to think Guinevere was actually hiding a side like that... "

Objecting to Athena's approval, Godou continued:

"So all her conspiracies and schemes to this date, were all for the sake of reviving that guy?"

"Forsooth. Thou shouldst pay attention. That man is the warrior fated to destroy all god-slayers. Were he to awaken, a war to exterminate the Devil Kings shall begin. If that happens, surely thou shalt perish."

Godou could not help but object to this sudden declaration.

How could anyone be sure without trying? I may be a pacifist, but if the other person comes murdering on his own initiative —

But then again, Athena's pubescent face had never shown such a severe expression.

Faced with such solemnity, Godou had nothing to say. And so, the corners of the goddess' mouth began to rise with delight.

"No matter, such words carry meaning only if thou art able to win our duel... Didst thou know? Virtually no god-slayer hath ever come to a peaceful end. The vast majority dieth on a battlefield somewhere. Thou only needst to follow in the footsteps of thy kin of past!"

"If that's the case, I will become one of the few exceptions. Let's go!"

Their fighting spirit was quietly rising.

In that case, Godou will rely on these heightened spirits to engage in battle. Athena glared sharply with her serpentine eyes once more as Godou readied his battle stance. Just at that moment, a crash of thunder was heard.

"Tsk! Thy arrival was expected, Lancelot du Lac!"

Athena smacked her lips as she gazed up into the sky.

Thunderclouds were rapidly filling the sky and furthermore, a flash of white lightning came flying from the direction of the Trans-Tokyo Bay Highway.

'Beware! This fellow is pure [Steel] like me!'

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi warned from Godou's right arm .

The lightning carried all sorts of omens, announcing the extraordinary visitor, mounted on his flying divine horse.

His body was wrapped in white armor. The helmet's lowered visor obscured the face. Furthermore, wielded in his hand was a lustrous lance with a platinum blade —

That kind of color and brightness had been witnessed the day before. Was that not the same brilliance as the white star of [Swords]!?

"Hey, isn't that the...!?"

"Yes. Yonder fellow is indeed the war god Lancelot. As that man's subordinate, the white maidservant's guardian. Furthermore , the wielder of the [Sword] that seeketh to tear us into pieces!"

Athena nodded with displeasure as she answered Godou's immediate query.

Lancelot. Isn't he the guy from the Knights of the Round Table?

Shocked, Godou heard an awe-inspiring manly voice from overhead.

"Athena. It is most pleasing to encounter you once again before your life depletes. And god-slayer Kusanagi Godou. Though the goddess has already introduced it, let this Knight's name be heard once more. Lancelot du Lac. Commonly known as the Knight of the Lake."

"...I don't remember telling you my name."

Godou responded to the mighty self introduction with displeasure.

If this guy and Guinevere were the masterminds of the current incident, there was no reason to trust him at all.

"Apologies. This Knight had no intention of insulting you... Even though forgiveness is unwarranted, apologies will still be expressed. For the act of ambushing you from the dark, taking advantage of your conflict as a third party. This kind of behavior is indeed an affront to chivalry. Most regrettable."

What the heck was up with this guy? Godou was intrigued.

An extremely forthright disposition. A kind of wondrous charisma similar to Verethragna when he had lost his memories—

"Hmph. Doth not be deceived. Even though yonder fellow is indeed a soldier of upright principles, he is merely a fool who displayeth might and valor for the maidservant's sake!"

"Perhaps. But all things considered, swords are that type of tool."

Lancelot agreed to Athena's accusation as he lightly kicked his beloved steed's belly.

The white divine horse began to slowly descend to the beach.

"The so-called heroes of steel, are sword gods who express the sword's attribute of living for battle only. Furthermore, this Knight has sworn to offer one's blade to beautiful women only."

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi called Lancelot its kin.

Expressing nothing but an obsession with battle. This was likely the trait of purebred steel.

"Fufufu. The knight indulges in rainstorms of bloodshed on the battlefield, tempered by a dash of womanly charms. Unfazed by mockery from others."

Despite his words, he did not give off the same impression as those useless men that were infatuated with women. Rather, he seemed like the type who demanded women of great quality, a Casanova who deliberately sought challenging conquests.

Perhaps this was only fitting for a god's prestige?

"But who knows if either of you two would approve..."

Lancelot's divine horse descended, its four feet landing on the beach.

Wielding the lance in one hand, Lancelot held a short pewter staff in his off-hand. Shaped like a twin-headed snake, it was being fiddled around lovingly as if it were a little flower.

"The Holy Grail's function has completely halted. Hmm... Even though the beloved child already preserved the power taken from the vessel, it is meaningless like this."

"In that case, war god, what dost thou wish to do?"

Athena displayed a goddess' solemnity as she spoke.

The child-like beautiful face glimmered lustrously with dignified battle spirit. She issued an obvious challenge.

On the other hand, Lancelot muttered liberally.

"Hmm, no other way then. Your chest shall be cut open so that this Knight can retrieve the Grail and do everything possible to awaken this mighty unparalleled divine artifact."

An indifferent declaration of slaughter. True to form as a [Heretic God], a fellow who could not be underestimated.

Godou tightly gripped his fist and glared at Lancelot.

"It seems like you two are having a duel of honor. Intruding in such a match would be unbecoming of a knight. However, this Knight has grown weary of waiting."

The white knight raised the lance's blade towards the sky.

His valor was apparent from this action. His rising battle spirit was impossible to suppress.

"Guinevere had warned this Knight before getting involved. To wait until you were both exhausted before killing either. However, a man in possession of lance and horse should never have to act in such a manner. Athena, this Knight's lance wishes to greet you with a cordial welcome once more!"

"Very well! One shall exact from thee what thou owest, before taking on Kusanagi Godou!"

Athena's sharp serpentine eyes turned to Lancelot. Lancelot faced her in turn with his white helmet.

Godou swiftly inserted himself between the two of them.

"Your opponent is not just Athena. Please let me participate in this battle."

"Oh?"

"What dost thou wish, Kusanagi Godou?"

The white knight was shocked, while Athena questioned. Unfazed, Godou continued.

"This is Athena and my duel after all. There's no rule preventing me from helping drive out the intruder. Or rather, it can be said that this is only natural."

"Natural? Hahaha, your words are truly interesting indeed!"

Lancelot's helmet shook in laughter in response to Godou's declaration.

It was not mockery. His tone was clearly overjoyed and he was laughing sincerely from the depths of his heart.

"God and god-slayer — irreconcilable foes fighting in cooperation, how could that be called natural!? Be that as it may, one cannot help but think as a warrior, it is impossible to reject. This Knight welcomes you to the fray."

Lancelot nonchalantly accepted the two versus one battle.

Truly the war god, such magnanimity. However, his opinion was actually not that important.

The problem was the haughty goddess. Turning his gaze to her, Godou was shocked. Athena's face was filled with surprise.

"...Dost thou know? In battles past — what that group of people did to vex that man so...?"

"—? What and what?"

Godou frowned at the cryptic question.

"Anyway, I want to drive this guy out quickly. That's why I want to fight together with you. Is that unacceptable?"

"No... One thinketh over it, this could very well be a good opportunity."

The look of surprise vanished in an instant as Athena resumed a dauntless expression immediately.

Godou began to wonder if he was imagining things.

"One hast instructed thee how to fight. Dost not become a burden!"

"Gonna say the same thing to you. I have more strength to spare than someone who's half a patient!"

Together, Athena and Godou stared at the war god.

They had once fought each other with all their strength, and had also traveled together. However, fighting side by side was a first experience. Godou was now relieved.

Athena's extreme haughtiness had made him worry whether she would accept the battle of two against one.

What could be the reason for her to accept fighting in cooperation?

Was it due to Lancelot being a formidable challenge, so she chose efficiency over honor? Or was there some other reason?

No matter what, an unprecedented deadly battle was now beginning.

Part 2

"Kusanagi Godou, that fellow's divine sword poseth no threat for now!"

Athena was the first to summon her favorite weapon, the grim reaper's scythe.

However, she did not change her height unlike previous battles, retaining her pubescent form. Perhaps she was trying to control her depletion of energy.

"A weapon that consumeth the earth's essence for nourishment. As long as the Holy Grail in one's body remaineth inactive, that blade cannot be swung."

"Oh? You've seen through it. How befitting of the goddess of wisdom."

Seen through by Athena, Lancelot offered praise from atop his mount. Furthermore.

"In that case, there is no need to be swinging around Master's relic."

He tossed the lance into the air, sending the horrific weapon to the opposite end of the clouds.

A barbed lance then materialized in Lancelot's hand.

"Hmm. This is more familiar after all. So, Athena, receive this Knight's lance!"

"Ha! One doth not believe this goddess shall lose to you in the arts of war!"

And thus the war god and the goddess began engaging in close quarter combat.

The mounted knight's white steed began to run, not at full speed, but on the level of a leisurely trot.

It was running towards the scythe-wielding goddess Athena. Mounted on his horse, Lancelot thrust his lance forward.

Once, twice, thrice. Godou was just able to see it clearly. However, from that point onwards his eyes could no longer keep up with the actions of the battling duo.

Like torrential rain that riddled the ground with holes, the raging barrage of thrusts aimed at the pubescent goddess.

Athena evaded the attacks with the tiniest of movements as she swung her grim reaper's scythe.

Was she trying to overcome the enemy's mounted advantage— She was swinging the scythe towards the white horse's front legs, chest and neck. Furthermore, she even attacked Lancelot's legs on the stirrups as well as the lance-wielding arm.

However, Athena's scythe was blocked on all occasions.

First of all, Lancelot's steed was exceptionally agile, jumping back immediately whenever the blade approached. Or stepping lightly back or to the side, skillfully changing defensive positions to let its master's lance block Athena's scythe with ease. The rider and horse truly acted as one.

Furthermore, Lancelot's armor was especially sturdy.

The white armor of iron essentially covered his entire body. Every attack from Athena's jet-black scythe towards his arms and legs, gauntlets and greaves, or breastplate were deflected.

"Make use of me, jump here!"

Godou yelled out as he ran forward.

In front of the white knight and divine horse. Even further ahead than Athena and her swinging scythe.

"Ohoh. How brave of you to charge before a knight without even drawing your sword!"

Lancelot was distracted for an instant.

Without failing to take advantage of this excellent opportunity, Athena sprang into action. Leaping lightly into the air, she stepped onto Godou's shoulder, using it as a platform for a second jump.

Leaping higher than Lancelot on his horse, Athena raised the scythe up high.

"Death bestowed by the underworld deity, infused into this blade!"

A full powered attack carrying spell words smashed into the white knight's chest.

It was not deflected this time. The jet-black blade penetrated lightly into the white breastplate. Near the area where the blade was embedded, corrosion began to spread.

"Ooh—!"

Lancelot's upper torso shook violently.

This single action made the scythe fall off from the breastplate while Athena's body was also sent flying as if she were crafted out of paper.

In a direct frontal confrontation, the knight god did not seem to approach the goddess of war. Seeing Athena land like a cat, Godou readied his stance.

The war god's next target was obviously himself!

"It is customarily in war for mounted warriors to bypass infantry. Though this is slightly unorthodox, exceptions will be made for the god-slayer!"

Yelling out, Lancelot patted the side of the white horse's neck.

With a loud neigh, the white divine horse stood up on its hind legs.

Now freed, its front legs swung at Godou's head.

A fierce horse's horseshoes were weapons rivaling iron hammers. Thus the two iron hooves descended.

Furthermore, it was no ordinary horse despite its ordinary-looking build, but a divine beast. Even a Campione's unreasonably sturdy body would be easily crushed by this exceptional kicking power—!

Godou immediately raised his arms to defend like a boxer.

Before the hooves of the divine horse, Godou could not expect too much from this paper-thin defense. However.

Clang! The strange noise of metal clashing was heard.

Godou's arms were currently as hard as steel. At the same time, he possessed unyielding strength that allowed him to hold his ground against the full force of a divine horse's trampling.

"Iron arms bearing peerless strength! Is that your authority!?"

Lancelot made a thrust with his lance.

It was too fast to see clearly. However, it probably aimed for Kusanagi Godou's head. Using a Campione's instincts for victory, Godou guarded his face with his right arm.

Clang! The same strange sound was heard again. It was the sound of his palm blocking the lance.

"Couldn't you have told me beforehand properly..."

'My assisting you? It's only expected!'

As Godou grumbled, Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi replied through thoughts.

When facing an enemy's overwhelming strength, Verethragna's second incarnation, the [Bull], provided monstrous might.

Furthermore, Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi had the ability to absorb the authorities of gods and Campiones, lending power to Godou.

What had been absorbed here was the sturdiness of the white armor.

Consequently, Godou's arms had obtained the hardness of steel, together with the [Bull]'s monstrous strength infused.

Godou furiously swung his left arm, striking at the white horse's chest.

An improvised left hook. Except that this iron fist could probably demolish a four or five-story commercial-residential building.

Perhaps aware of the punch's power, Lancelot's divine horse jumped back a great distance.

"So that is how it is... Kusanagi Godou. Thou hast probably procured a rather useful tool — of steel's kind."

Athena remarked, having been thrown back into the distance just now.

Instead of approaching where Godou and the war god were positioned, she knelt down where she had landed, striking the sand with her hand.

"Marry! In that case, one hath no choice but to exhibit a mother earth goddess' power!"

Immediately, an earthquake occurred.

Violent tremors. The beach battlefield was intensely shaking.

Godou's sense of balance was overcome and he had to fall back on his hands and knees. Had this earthquake occurred in towns and cities, many homes would likely have collapsed.

Rumble rumble rumble rumble — the quake was on a scale where one could vaguely hear the actual ground sounding out.

On the other hand, Lancelot remained upright despite the conditions.

Splendidly controlling his steed without losing to the cataclysmic event. No, not only that, his divine horse had leaped into the air and started flying.

"...Right, he arrived here by flying just now."

Continuing to lie prone on the ground, Godou muttered.

Lancelot and the divine horse's rapid ascent was like a rocket's takeoff, speeding up towards the clouds. In that case, the earthquake became meaningless.

However, just as Godou wondered, Athena stood up all of a sudden.

"Hohohoho... Knight of the Lake. Thou mayst perchance be a peerless knight upon the earth. However, how dost thou fare in the sky!?"

As the shaking of the ground subsided, Athena smiled fearlessly as wings sprouted from her back.

Brown wings, covered with countless spotted patterns, rather than pure white feathers like an angel's. I see. Godou understood as he stood up.

Athena's forms were not limited to the snake. Those were wings of an owl.

The sacred bird that flew freely in the night sky. The symbol of wisdom. Moreover, the messenger of death from the underworld. The form of the goddess' favorite bird of prey!

"O Night. 'Tis the time ruled by the queen of the underworld. Respondest to one's invitation and lowerest the curtains of the sky!
"

Athena commanded the sky as she pointed with her index finger.

The brightness vanished in an instant. The morning sun was occluded, turning day into night.

If this cataclysmic event had only occurred on this beach, it would probably be easier to cover up the truth— Godou could not help but try praying to something other than gods.

"Oh. Is this the darkness invoked by the queen of the sky, the earth and the underworld!? In that case, this Knight shall summon lightning as comrades-in-arms, it is only natural to return the favor !"

Lancelot's voice came from above. At that moment, white light flashed repeatedly, tearing through the night sky.

It was produced by the thunderclouds summoned when white knight first appeared. Even though battles between gods and Campiones were very far-fetched, internal strife between gods were equally ridiculous or even more so—

Godou expressed utter surprise at the series of cataclysmic events. It was really too ridiculous.

Unaware of such thoughts in Godou, Athena spread her owl wings and took off. Gliding smoothly as if skating on ice, she crossed the night sky.

"One's feathered wings may be regarded as the avian ruler of the sky, war god!"

"If that is the case, then savor this Knight's lightning, goddess!"

As lightning repeatedly flashed and exploded across the night sky, the stage was set for the gods' intense confrontation to transition to an aerial battle.

Lancelot and his divine horse simply flew in straight lines.

Charging at the goddess like an arrow, targeting her with straight thrusts from the lance. Both the knight and his beloved steed were enveloped in flashing lightning and cracking thunder.

Banking gracefully, Athena avoided the charging attack.

That smooth flowing trajectory was like the movements of a seabird engaged in a hunt. As if targeting shoals of fish beneath the sea, diving silently to strike with its beak—

"As expected. The sky is not thy domain. Thou art full of openings!"

Athena circled around to Lancelot's back as she dodged the attack.

Held in her slender and beautiful hands were a silver bow and arrows.

The sight of Athena firing the arrow was reminiscent of another Greek goddess, Artemis the huntress.

"Hahaha. Perhaps you are right. Who knows if this Knight was born clumsy, but flying was never learned properly. However, this is not enough to strike this Knight down!"

True to his words, Lancelot and his divine horse evaded in a V-shape and managed to escape the arrow shot from behind.

The abrupt and forceful change of trajectory stood in stark contrast against Athena's graceful turns.

His flying speed also slowed down. Targeting this, Athena drew the bow once again. The second arrow struck Lancelot's white helmet, but was deflected with a loud clang.

Discovering the goddess' intentions, Godou nodded.

A battle on land favored the knight. But in the air they were equals.

Firing arrows with her silver bow, Athena was an owl gliding across the night sky, gracefully flying in silence.

In contrast, Lancelot's strengths did not lie in flying.

He probably could not fly in anything but straight lines (basically tracing out parabolas).

Consequently, he could only change directions using V-shaped maneuvers. Even though his top speed could catch up to Athena, he was forced to slow down when making turns, and was thus unable to maintain any advantage.

That said, his exceptionally sturdy armor meant that he was not at a disadvantage either—

"But then again, if they continue buzzing over my head and flying around, I can't help at all."

Godou grumbled as he looked up at the aerial battle.

His arms of iron bearing monstrous strength could not reach that height... No, could he figure out a way? Then the problem became finding a suitable projectile. Just as Godou began to search the beach...

"War god Lancelot... This goddess is aware that one's weapons have been unable to destroy thy steel. Nevertheless, this arrow is different. It looketh like an arrow but arrow it is not. 'Tis the temptation of death, released for the sake of the underworld's queen. Namely, 'tis death itself."

Athena flew casually to evade Lancelot's charge as she circled around the white knight's head as she called out.

The goddess' right hand placed the arrow onto the silver longbow.

The arrow's fletchings were made of owl feathers. The arrowhead was carved out of obsidian. All were products of Stone Age.

"Heroes of steel are indeed immortal on the battlefield. However, what of pestilence? Or perhaps, faced with termination from old age!?"

Athena's fingers released the arrow. The obsidian arrowhead flew at Lancelot below!

Just at that moment, the white knight and the divine horse disappeared.

Godou saw the black arrow trace across the sky fruitlessly, falling onto the beach. Furthermore, the surroundings were suddenly covered by exceptionally dense mist.

"W-What is this?"

'Lancelot must have used the protection of immortality.'

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi responded to Godou's surprise.

'That fellow seems to have melded into the mist to seek refuge. Mist can neither be pierced nor severed. Even curses cannot take effect. Well, it can still be dispersed by storm winds.'

"If that guy is hidden in the mist then that means he can ambush Athena and me?"

'Impossible. Pure-blooded [Steel] will not do anything underhanded of that sort. The level of nocturnal or morning assaults is the limit. If not glorious to the very end, our kind's battles are always intense as lightning. When that fellow switches to offense once more, the mist shall surely disperse.'

A similar kindred spirit after all? It almost sounded as if the sword was talking about itself.

In that case, conversely, there will be some respite before the knight returned from the mist. A certain notion surfaced in Godou's mind. He had to find that thing now. Where on earth was it?

In thick mist with visibility less than 5m, he could only rely on a Campione's instincts.

A god's movements — searching for divine power, Godou began to concentrate.

A huge mass of power was swirling high in the air. That must be Athena.

At the same time, somewhere in the air precipitated a weak power. Perhaps it was Lancelot in his mist form. I see. Once he could be sensed in this manner, there were no more concerns of a surprise attack.

Further more, there was one more presence.

Even closer than the gods in sky, there was something else that had fallen to the ground.

It was fine as long as it had not sunk into the sea. Godou began walking in the mist, seeking the presence of divine power. Luckily, his search bore fruit in a matter of minutes.

"—So cold!?"

Picking it up from the beach, Godou was shocked. This was even colder than dry ice.

"In that case, this is actually a very dangerous object..."

Godou broke out in cold sweat.

Were he not bearing arms of iron, he might have suffered already?

The effects were probably not as simple as cold burns. Definitely would have suffered more severe injuries... Just as Godou shuddered, the mist dispersed in an instant.

'It's coming, King! That fellow has entered the thunderclouds. The next strike intends to annihilate that mother earth goddess — no, all of us!'

Godou knew without needing the divine sword's warning.

The sky was filled with dark clouds as before. However, not a single flash of lightning could be seen.

He must be storing power. Godou realized.

Instincts of a Campione, or perhaps experience gained from various hellish trials, allowed him to understand immediately.

Godou sought out the position of Athena who should still be in the sky.

Found her. Slowly flapping her owl wings, she was hovering in the night sky.

However, the young and beautiful face was tense with deathly determination, and her glare was as sharp as a ferocious bird of prey. She already knew it was a decisive moment.

Godou hurried and ran over in Athena's direction.

Part 3

Alas. An excellent battle—

With great satisfaction, Lancelot savored the thrill of battle he had missed greatly.

He was currently hidden within the thunderclouds. Lightning crackled and popped in his surroundings, exploding, raging. A most familiar scene.

Having turned into mist together with the white divine horse, they had made their way here.

Protecting his favorite woman was not disagreeable, but it was insufficient to satisfy his hunger. Other than the battlefield, no other place allowed him to fully apply his skills and talents.

Pursuing this way of life even into bitter death, the implements of war and horse could not be done without.

He had guarded the Witch Queen, the Divine Ancestor, for over a millennium. Along the way, he had also offered minor assistance to witches who had attained the pinnacles of heaven and earth.

Spending his days in this manner could not be considered unhappy. However, would a raging warrior who charged on the battlefield be satisfied with such a life? No, impossible.

Lancelot could feel his body and mind awakening.

"Having a god and a god-slayer as opponents, displaying the valorous might against unfavorable odds of two against one. Now that is a man's long-cherished wish. Hohoho, this Knight is reminded of battles past."

Lancelot soliloquized and looked down at the world beneath him once more.

Using the mind's eye he located two "presences."

Namely, the goddess Athena and the god-slayer Kusanagi Godou. Both were amazingly roused in battle spirit.

"One would really like to enjoy a duel like this for eternity. Be that as it may, it is not this Knight's style. Time to gallop forth."

The dim mist vanished. Spurring the white divine horse onwards, Lancelot restored the valorous form of the knight.

Within the thundercloud, Lancelot lightly caressed his partner's neck.

"This Knight's incomplete form probably cannot endure battle beyond this. If this joy of battle were to be savored for too long, this Knight's heart will begin to lose composure. Perhaps it would hasten the arrival of the day when the beloved child shall be abandoned. Indeed, it is about time for the tide to ebb."

Finishing his muttering, Lancelot instantly made his divine power incinerate.

Last time, the lightning infused meteor crash had defeated Athena. For the sake of this full powered attack at maximum speed ...

He had already began preparations when he turned into mist.

In order to reach lightning speed — god speed, a great amount of lightning needed to be absorbed.

Which was why he had entered the thunderclouds.

"In this current state, a single charge at maximum speed will probably deplete all energy. Failure means defeat and repeating the past. One shall charge with care."

Reminding himself, he lightly kicked the divine horse's abdomen.

First Athena shall be pierced in the sky, and then Kusanagi Godou shall be flattened on the ground. Having thus decided, the white knight and divine horse instantly descended from the sky with lightning speed.

Turning into a white meteor flying out of the thunderclouds—!

Knowing Lancelot was coming, Godou ran at full speed.

Meanwhile, Athena had suddenly stopped at a certain position in the air, and called out spell words.

"Aegis of the Gorgon, defendest this goddess to the death!"

The silver longbow previously held in her hand had transformed into a massive shield.

A rectangular shield large enough to cover the entire body of pubescent Athena. The shield's surface was carved with a design in the likeness of the snake demoness Medusa.

Lifting the shield high towards the sky, Athena readied her defensive posture.

Abandoning her weapon and taking out the shield. She must have decided she would be struck down immediately otherwise. Was this still the great and aggressive goddess!?

In the instant of Godou's surprise, the white flash descended.

With hardly any time elapsed, Lancelot and the divine horse collided with Athena.

What amazing speed. Indeed it was a descent of god speed as fast as lightning!

Riding the galloping white divine horse, Lancelot made a thrust of the barbed lance with one hand, using the other hand to hold a rhombic shield. Over his armor was a combat surcoat. Flawlessly armed to the teeth.

Furthermore, his entire body was giving off the light of electricity.

Bringing astounding heat and shockwaves, this was exceptional destructive power.

With her massive shield, Athena blocked this attack like a canopy guarding the earth.

The tip of Lancelot's lance pierced into the Gorgon's shield, trying to dig through. However, with Medusa's protection, the defensive equipment squeaked as it resisted—

"Gwooh! An astounding attack as ever!"

"What! This Knight professes admiration. Twice you have blocked my maximum speed full powered charge, as befits one along the lineage of the matriarch deity, and the goddess of war!"

The war god and the goddess who blocked his rapid descent were locked in a standstill.

It was a battle of strength in the divine realm, comparable to a violent impact between a meteorite and the earth's surface.

Nevertheless, it seemed like Lancelot had the advantage? Godou felt anxious.

It was readily apparent that Athena was halting the white knight's descent with all her strength. Conversely, Lancelot gave the impression that he had yet to go all out.

Were Lancelot to strike the ground, it would result in a tragic disaster on the level of a massive meteorite impact.

Certain in this belief, Godou raised his arms above his head.

The war god and the goddess were clashing about a hundred meters in the air above.

Then there was no problem. Godou was originally a baseball player; moreover, he had been a catcher with a strong throw.

On many occasions, too many to count, he had foiled base-stealing attempts of fast runners. Godou had absolute confidence in the speed, power and accuracy of his pickoffs.

Furthermore, he still had the monstrous strength provided by Verethragna's [Bull].

In that case, his pitch will surely reach its target. Besides, Lancelot and Athena were hovering motionlessly in one spot, pushing each other at full strength.

In terms of sumo wrestling, this would be the grappling phase. A perfect target. Evasion would be impossible!

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Godou yelled as he threw the piece of obsidian.

It was the arrow that Athena had fired but Lancelot had dodged by turning into mist. This was the arrowhead portion that Godou had ripped off. That lovely thing Godou had been searching for in the mist.

Stone. This was probably the most primitive weapon humans ever laid their hands on.

No matter what situation, a stone could be used to strike as a weapon simply by holding it in one's hand. If thrown, it was an excellent projectile.

Godou initially intended to throw the concrete blocks that were being used as wavebreakers on the beach. With his current monstrous strength, acting as a catapult was a simple task.

However, he remembered the white armor's sturdiness as well as the arrowhead's matter.

Throwing as hard as he could, the piece of obsidian was launched towards the sky. Right on target, it struck the white

helmet of Lancelot while he clashed his lance against Athena's shield, trying to overpower her.

"Gufu! This was the earlier...!?"

"Ohoh! Superbly done, Kusanagi Godou."

In that very instant, Lancelot expressed shock as Athena offered praise.

The obsidian shattered into a thousand fragments, scattering inside the knight's armor. Furthermore, a black amorphous shadow manifested, entangling itself around Lancelot's shoulder and back.

This blackness was equivalent to death itself.

Even more pitch-black than the surrounding night sky, a Campione's senses knew.

A shadow darker than black night. This was true darkness surpassing aphotic black.

Expressly prepared for the purpose of sending Lancelot to his grave, most likely. In any case, it was like the time when Athena was prepared to rouse a dormant volcano for the sake of exterminating Perseus.

"Guh, ooooooooooooooooooh!"

Lancelot roared like a wild beast.

It was a sound similar to a lamenting wail. A loud scream that expressed suffering far greater than a cry of pain.

Godou could sense that the divine power released by the white knight had substantially weakened. Most likely his strength and endurance had been eroded completely.

This strength was probably what the knight had used to power his meteoric descent.

Athena, just about to reach the limits of her strength and be sliced apart, forcefully used her shield to push Lancelot and his lance back and summoned spell words.

"Medusa, one of this goddess' avatars! The time cometh to restrain this enemy!"

The snake demon's likeness had been carved onto the great shield.

Despite being a beautiful maiden, countless snakes instead of hair grew out of her head.

Shining with golden brilliance, her eyes glared at the weakened war god Lancelot and his white divine steed!

Instantly, the divine steed was turned into stone, from a vigorous white horse into a statue of a galloping horse. Lancelot's left arm, left leg and armor were also petrified at the same time.

The battle was decided, right—

This thought only crossed Godou's mind for an instant before he changed his mind. Even though an arm, a leg and the white horse had been petrified, the knight did not stop charging. He continued to clash against the Gorgon's shield.

For the goal of skewering Athena and flattening Kusanagi Godou to the ground!

"This resolute resistance on the verge of death, deserveth one's praise indeed! But war god, dost thou have a way to overturn this unfavorable situation!?"

"Ooohmmm... That other one..."

Lancelot replied in feeble moans to Athena's call.

He was originally in an abnormal state already. Enduring [Death] from the underworld deity and deprived of power, even moving a single finger felt exhausting. All movements felt like heavy burdens.

He also felt colder than anything else.

This sort of coldness could probably be savored only in the instant before one froze to death.

What a blessing it would be to simply lie down and die just like that. Nevertheless, Lancelot did not halt his charge, pouring forth

what remained of his divine power into the petrified beloved steed , forcing his left arm and leg to move, continuing to act as a white meteor.

It was truly hard to believe. His body was clearly in such a state, yet his heart continued to yearn for battle!

Perhaps it was precisely this perilous situation that incited him to fight forcefully like scattering sparks. This was a knight's talent, the style of the warrior —!

"This Knight apologizes for the earlier rudeness. One had no intention of deceiving you..."

"Hmm?"

As Athena expressed surprise while she pushed against him, Lancelot continued clashing against the Gorgon's shield.

Rather, his current situation would be more accurately described as "falling." At the same time, he turned his gaze up towards the air. To a place even further beyond the clouds. Where the object of his attentions was currently hovering.

"One originally thought it unnecessary for this battle, so it was cast aside. With no ulterior motives, this cannot be helped for there is no other trump card. Surely you are unable to block in that direction, hence, this Knight shall take advantage of that!"

"War god, couldst thou..."

Athena's beautiful face clearly showed she understood. Nevertheless, it was too late.

The divine lance that had been tossed into the sky before the battle. Even if the blade had slipped off the thunderclouds, it remained motionless, hovering in midair still.

However, summoned by the thoughts of the wielder it was magically bound to, it began to stir.

Lancelot began chanting in secret.

—Come, Divine Sword of Salvation. The sacred sword that brings stars to fall.

The platinum blade fell from the distant sky.

And stabbed directly into Athena's defenseless back.

The goddess began to weaken as her life force was absorbed, becoming like Lancelot. She had already depleted most of her remaining strength in the current battle. Using such a body to block the white meteor, she likely lacked spare capacity to defend against the Divine Sword of Salvation.

In the instant the brilliant blade struck, golden light erupted all at once from Athena's body.

Part 4

The Holy Grail's creation was almost fifteen hundred years ago.

However, the Divine Sword of Salvation had existed even before that. The king who manifested at the end of ages — was the war god who was the divine sword's original user. What did that imply?

In other words, even without the Grail, the Divine Sword of Salvation could still be used.

Before Guinevere's previous incarnation and Lancelot had joined under his command, the "King of the End" had already wielded the divine blade countless times.

The Divine Sword of Salvation was fueled by the life force of the earth—

So before the Holy Grail existed, how was it provided to the sword?

The answer was simple. The "King of the End," strongest amongst [Steel], provided it himself.

So-called heroes of steel were themselves warriors who fought against the mother earth goddesses. In the myths, they defeated desperate mother earth goddesses who had turned into dragons and snakes, thereby obtaining power. Furthermore, they would often take as their lovers or supporters the mother earth goddesses who had been reduced to the form of young girls.

The majority of [Steel] possessed the attribute of exploiting the earth.

In that sense, it was only natural for *Him* to be called the strongest man. In fact, there was no other war god who could surpass him in this domain.

The so-called Holy Grail, was the divine artifact offered to the " King of the End" for the purpose of lessening his labors.

For the first time, Lancelot imitated his former master's authority of exploitation.

"For this Knight's victory, one beseeches. Grant unto this Knight permission to plunder the sacred!"

Lancelot never expected to develop such a relationship, fighting alongside that man on the battlefield, riding shoulder to shoulder.

How he gathered power, how he fought, everything was etched clearly in Lancelot's memory.

Furthermore, Lancelot was also [Steel]. He believed he could surely achieve the same thing. Gambling upon this belief he yelled out the spell words — and it worked as expected.

Golden light was bursting out of Athena's slender body.

This brilliant splendor was the mother earth goddess' essence, life force of the purest form beyond compare.

The Divine Sword of Salvation absorbed it and began to awaken . This was followed by an explosion of golden light. Life force flowed out from Athena's body as if dynamite had exploded.

Between Athena and the Divine Sword of Salvation, a "pathway " had been established towards Lancelot.

The "pathway" for absorbing life force from the goddess who embodied the earth was rather narrow and weak. Imitation was merely imitation after all. The difference in the ability compared to the original possessor was immensely vast.

However, this was sufficient to use the divine sword—

Blown back by the explosion of golden light, Lancelot nodded. Transmitting his thoughts, he summoned the Divine Sword of Salvation to return.

Meanwhile, Athena crashed towards the earth.

Whether the white meteor whose descent was halted or the flying winged goddess, both were blown away by the explosion of golden light.

"Damn. Was she defeated!?"

Godou yelled as he ran towards where Athena was free-falling.

He made it at least. Just barely before she hit the beach, he caught her in his arms.

Even though it was the slender body of a young girl, having fallen from such a height up in the sky, Godou would probably not have caught her so easily without the [Bull]'s strength.

"..."Tis most unfavorable, Kusanagi Godou. Yonder blade shall attack us once more..."

Held in Godou's arms, Athena moaned as she spoke.

This was his first time to witness the goddess' face showing vulnerability commensurate with her pubescent appearance.

In addition, his arm cradling her back was wet. With blood. Blood was flowing from the wound in her back and the owl's wings had already vanished.

"Did Lancelot do this?"

"Yes. 'Tis no easy feat for thee to have sealed the Holy Grail. But that fellow is using his own power to absorb this goddess' life. If one were not injured, that kind of undeveloped authority, should more or less hath been resisted..."

She no longer had the strength to proudly raise her head up high.

Athena leaned powerlessly against Godou as she whispered. Just as Godou was overwhelmed with surprise at the unusual situation, he saw a white sun shining in the sky.

It was currently night. Night forcefully summoned by Athena.

However, the white star hovered in midair, illuminating the area brightly.

"...For one's full powered attack at maximum speed to be blocked for the very first time, you deserve this Knight's praise, Athena. Young god-slayer, Lancelot is delighted to be able to fight you!"

Furthermore, a muttering voice, as gloomy as a dead ghost's, could be heard.

Lancelot must have landed at some point in time. His left arm and left leg petrified, the white knight stood a couple dozens of meters ahead.

He was speaking in a cheerless and commanding tone, yet his entire body expressed delight in battle.

Probably because he no longer had the strength to talk cheerfully. Lancelot was also covered in wounds. However, that lance — his hand held the Divine Sword of Salvation. He still held the overwhelming advantage.

"A long drawn-out battle is not this Knight's style. Let the conclusion be reached right here. O Sword, split apart the earth!"

In response to the spell words, the white star released a flash of bright light that resembled a laser beam.

Godou gritted his teeth. He had not wanted to use this incarnation due to its time restrictions. Nevertheless, for the sake of the overall situation, there was no choice now!

Verethragna's seventh incarnation, the [Raptor]. This meant abandoning his current great strength, but Godou obtained god speed movement and perception in return.

Godou embraced Athena as he dodged sideways, managing to evade the flash of light.

"That sort of speed had been seen yesterday already. Hohoho, do you really think this Knight would have no skill to counter it?"

Lancelot was completely unfazed.

Godou was certain. Even if Lancelot did not bother to scrutinize Kusanagi Godou's every move, he could still discern them as if he was watching from the sky, far above.

Even if Godou completely unleashed god speed, it felt like his moves will be seen through completely—

Godou was filled with unease. How... No, there was no mistake. That guy must be able to use the mind's eye. The divine skill that Luo Cuilian and Salvatore Doni had mastered after undergoing harsh and grim trials!

If Godou moved recklessly, he would be sliced apart in an instant.

However, if he stayed still he would still be shredded like a carrot.

Cold sweat flowed down his back. What should he do? He cannot despair at a time like this. Think!

"...Believe in this goddess, runnest. Even Lancelot's great sword, thou canst surely evade it."

Athena whispered softly.

Was it a divine oracle, or the devil's temptation? Fu. Godou drew in a deep breath. There was no need to doubt. By this point, they were already in the same boat.

In the instant the white star began firing blades of light again, Godou jumped backwards.

Seen through. Seen through. This certain belief filled his mind.

Godou's every movement after entering god speed had been completely captured by Lancelot. No matter how he moved, how he dodged, he will be sliced all the same—!

However, the white light missed its mark. Piercing emptiness, it tunneled through the sand.

"Oh, this. Summoning darkness for this purpose, how thoughtful."

Lancelot grumbled.

Godou's instincts were correct. The [Raptor]'s god speed was roughly on the same level as the shining sword of light. In a pure race of speed, either could win depending on circumstances. However, Lancelot's mind's eye should allow him to slice Godou apart despite his god-like speed.

"Be reassured. Let this goddess' darkness disrupt Lancelot's vision for now. But a knight of that caliber should be able to adjust soon enough..."

Hearing Athena's whispers, Godou understood.

Darkness was essentially something that robbed creatures of their sight apart from a portion of nocturnal animals.

Letting night descend and disrupting others' vision was also part of Athena's authority. In that case, even the clarity of the war god's vision could be disrupted. This was why Godou was able to dodge the white sword.

Did she summon the darkness of night in anticipation of a crisis like this?

"Well then, quantity shall be used instead to obtain victory... It is going to be messy, but please understand."

But Lancelot immediately responded in that manner.

The star up high began to fire off light again, but this time the white light was shaped into balls of lightning instead of beams of light.

Two meters in diameter or so. Flying at lightning speed. Four of these balls of lightning had appeared.

Flying towards Kusanagi Godou and Athena from four different directions.

"Come on, could he attack with any less composure!?"

The divine knight probably loved getting into action quickly and decisively.

Godou grumbled to himself as he watched out for the balls of lightning attacking from four directions, namely, straight up, from the left and right, and the last one diagonally above.

He would only be unscathed if he dodged them all at once. Judging thus, Godou made a great jump backwards.

Roughly a distance of ten meters or so. The [Raptor] conferred lightness of body like a bird. The balls of lightning descended upon Godou and Athena's last position.

But they immediately changed directions to pursue the prey that had retreated, chasing them down with lightning speed.

Godou unleashed god speed to the max, and sped across the beach. If he stopped for a single moment he would have been struck by any of the balls of lightning.

From the eyes of an ordinary person, the current scene must have seemed quite horrifying yet fantastical.

Something unidentified was running around with the speed of lightning. Some object, whose silhouette could not even be seen, was endlessly flying everywhere, shuttling between light and electricity that scattered like sparks—

However, there were no observers of this battle. The only ones aware of this strange situation were the participants.

Particularly maddening for Godou was the fact that Lancelot did not recklessly squander the divine sword. He did not use the life force absorbed from Athena to engage in wasteful rapid fire, but was using the balls of lightning efficiently instead. Had he been recklessly performing wasteful attacks, Godou would have found an opening!

Godou desperately escaped from the balls of lightning that encircled him like a net.

If Athena had not disrupted Lancelot's vision, Godou would have been sliced apart many times over already.

"Pressured so much... Impossible to counterattack."

Godou grumbled softly as he ran.

Once Lancelot's eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he would slice Godou into two with one strike. Hence it was imperative to mount an offense before that. But then how should he attack?

Even though his arms were as hard as iron, they did not seem like they could crush that white armor.

All things considered, the prototype was Lancelot's own sturdiness. At best, Godou's arms would just be on the same level of hardness.

"Asking wouldn't hurt. If you absorbed my [Raptor], would it help right now?"

'No good. Or rather, it cannot be done. Absorbing your active authority will be exceptionally painful. It will become unusable for several days.'

The question directed at Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi obtained an expected answer.

Godou did not give up. He knew that if it could help, this meddlesome sword would have acted on its own accord already.

"This goddess has a plan, Kusanagi Godou."

A voice that sounded like it came from far away. When moving at god speed, that was how Godou perceived other people's voices.

Obviously, these were Athena's whispers.

Godou was surprised by her sudden call to him. The content of her proposal was even more shocking. Shouldn't there be limits to recklessness? However, Godou understood the instant he finished listening.

Ah, I see. This deity truly lived up to the name of the great goddess of war—

Godou thought to himself. As a result, he replied almost instantly.

"...Ah, okay then."

Godou embraced Athena with his right arm as he ran back and forth all over the place.

Causing not only himself but also everything he carried to lose their weight, this was the [Raptor]'s unique skill.

The goddess entrusted her entire weight over and leaned her head against Godou's face. He could not see her current expression , but he was certain.

Athena must be smiling with satisfaction right now.

Godou silently moved his hand to touch her slender back and began to caress gently. Then he penetrated deeply.

"Guuh—!"

Athena began to make brief moans. Beads of sweat appeared from the pain.

Ignoring these signs, Godou spread open his palm embedded inside the goddess' body.

There was no bleeding. Neither was there an open wound on the goddess' beautiful back. Godou's hand had been invited into Athena's body by her own will.

Right arm. Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi. The mortal enemy's hand which contained tabooed steel.

"The sword which claimeth the power of heretical outsider foes for its own use... One shall infuse the life force and energy of this great mother earth goddess into this fellow. Combined with one's secret arts, the blade of heaven and earth's creation shall be forged. ..! Goest forth and claim thy victory, god-slayer!"

Athena endured the pain as she whispered in a hazy voice.

The divinity of steel that was in conflict with the mother earth goddesses. It must have been exceptionally painful for such an existence to enter her body.

"Thou mentioned earlier. Of seeking a way to save this goddess in the Netherworld. Hohoho, to be honest, that is the one and only path of survival. Abandoning one's heretical traits, becoming a hermit in the Boundary of Life and Immortality. In that case, one's connection to the earth will be severed, and the link to the Holy Grail shall also vanish..."

Bearing this torment, Athena resolutely bore a smile.

"Or perchance, one wondereth of choosing another path... Nevertheless, since things have developed to this state, this goddess no longer hath a choice after all. Rather than have Athena abandon the ways of Athena, one prefereth to seek an end worthy of this goddess."

Godou halted his footsteps, shutting down god speed and withdrew his arm.

Setting Athena down on the beach, all preparations for intercepting the enemy were complete.

"Kusanagi Godou. Wield thy sword in this goddess' stead..."

"Yes. Please be patient for a moment, for after this shall be our conclusion."

Godou raised his right arm under Athena's gaze.

Manifesting in his hand was the divine blade Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi. Its blade was jet-black as usual, but this time, it was incinerating with dark black flames.

These were rare otherworldly flames that did not give off any scorching heat.

They were ice-cold instead. Gusts of exceptionally chilling air were being blown out from the dark black flames. One would likely suffer instant cold burns on contact.

At this very moment, the four balls of lightning controlled by Lancelot arrived.

Godou did not even swing Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi. Wrapped in dark black flames, the black metal automatically absorbed the balls of lightning. Just like that, they disappeared.

"Hmm... The Divine Sword of Salvation has been countered, yes ?"

Standing directly beneath the white star, Lancelot seemed to be in doubt.

"Not exactly countered. But your small demonstration of power was neutralized, more or less. Right now, this sword is imitating the same principles at work behind yours."

Godou explained softly.

Time was running out. The battle must be ended as quickly as possible.

Part 5

"That whatever sword or lance of yours... It's quite powerful, right?"

"Hmm. In the legends of this Knight's master, this steel was called Caliburnus, Escalibor, Excalibur and other names. The precious apocalyptic blade that could slice through heaven, earth, and the planets."

Lancelot replied quietly to Godou's question.

He was less than twenty meters away from the white knight. Using the [Raptor], that distance could be crossed in an instant.

"Really? This sword of mine doesn't have that kind of ability though. Athena said it could create heaven and earth? Well, not as amazing as yours, at any rate."

"Indeed. This Knight's steel body feels bone-chilling fear."

Godou made conversation as he searched for an opportunity to charge. Gripping Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi's hilt tightly, he was holding it completely like he was swinging a baseball bat.

But this was good enough. His intent was not in displaying swordsmanship. He will swing it in the most skillful and familiar manner he knew. That was the most important point.

In response, Lancelot also pointed the tip of his platinum divine lance towards Godou's abdomen.

A stance for mid level attack. White light flashed as it descended from the brilliant star above. Receiving the light, the lance's blade now shone with radiance as bright as the sun.

The opponent was thinking the same thing? Godou's lips separated into a savage grin.

Lancelot also knew the battle had entered the phase when tactics were pointless and there was no longer time to think ahead and anticipate the enemy's moves. On Godou's side, he did not have much time left. Lancelot, on the other hand, was covered with injuries. Precisely because of that, both reached the same conclusion.

"Ama no Murakumo, hurry and send that guy flying!"

"O Divine Sword of Salvation, displayest thy splendorous might to the god-slayer!"

As the two cried out simultaneously, sword and lance attacked at the same time.

Godou turned Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi's blade forward as he advanced with divine speed. Lancelot captured Godou's movements using the mind's eye and intended to strike him with the divine lance's blade.

Along the way, Godou switched off god speed to decelerate, planning on speeding up when the knight was caught unaware.

But before that could happen, Lancelot released lightning from the divine lance to hinder Godou.

Dodging the lightning, Godou accelerated once more. Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi was only centimeters away from the

knight's white armor when in the final instant, Lancelot used the divine lance's platinum blade to block the black metal that burned with dark black flames—

In the end, black and white sacred steel clashed violently.

The Divine Sword of Salvation. The blade of extermination which could slice apart all of creation.

In contrast, having received Athena's life force and secret arts, Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi's jet-black blade sucked everything into it. Like a super massive black hole, it sought to devour all of creation.

Taking as nourishment everything it had absorbed, autonomously converting it into new life. Like aged stars exploding into supernovae, their remains were turned into materials for new celestial objects.

Even though this was happening on a tiny scale, it imitated the life cycle of stars.

Consequently, this black metal was capable of heaven and earth's creation—

Flashes of white light and lightning flew around in a frenzy, not only illuminating the beach and the territory of the Bousou Sea with platinum-colored brightness, but also creating aurora in the sky.

Then Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi sucked in everything to produce a spherical space of pure darkness.

Like the white star produced by the Divine Sword of Salvation, the black hole-esque object hovered high in the sky.

The sacred white star and the sacred dark space collided violently together, exploding, entangling, firing destructive light and gravitational pulses, finally disappearing. Mutual annihilation .

At that moment, a horrifying shockwave hurtled towards the beach.

Altering the landscape — not only that, the power was enough to erase the landscape without trace.

Lancelot was spectacularly blown away.

Godou ran with god speed, desperately trying to evade the shockwave, but in the end he was still caught in the blast.

Although not to the same extent as the white knight, Godou was basically sent flying. Even so, along the way he still managed to pick up Athena as she lay on the ground, protecting her with his body the moment they were sent flying.

Thanks to this, one of Kisarazu's beaches was destroyed.

A wasteland was created, providing no clue to the landscape's former appearance, clouded with flying dust and debris.

Even so, Lancelot still stood up by supporting himself with the divine lance to seek his enemies. Kusanagi Godou also set down Athena once more, walking as he used Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi as a crutch.

Godou's body was covered with wounds no less serious than the enemy's.

His right arm was probably broken near the elbow. His chest was hurting beneath his arm. How many ribs were broken? Internal organs were injured and he was spitting blood. He also felt extremely nauseous. His heart was in intense pain, which likely meant the [Raptor]'s time limit was fast approaching. Scratches, bruises, internal and external bleeding were innumerable.

...Well, this was like being caught up in a terrorist's bomb. It was a miracle to be alive.

Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi was also snapped into two. Too reckless.

He could no longer hear the divine sword's meddlesome voice. Apparently it was no longer functional for the time being. Unbelievably, Godou felt no compulsion to flee.

Godou dragged his feet as he approached Lancelot.

The opponent was also taking up his lance shakily, displaying the will to fight. This guy was unexpectedly similar in temperament.

"—Sir Lancelot. Your ward Guinevere has already escaped the battlefield. What course of action shall your divine self take?"

Just as the battle was about to resume, Erica's voice was heard.

Godou turned to find the long-absent Erica Blandelli approaching nearby, together with Ena who was being supported by Liliana and Yuri.

...Calming his mind, Godou recalled his goal.

Now was the time when Athena should come first. If he forced the fight to continue in his current state, there would not be enough time no matter what.

"Oh? This Knight's beloved child... Concentrating only on battle, did one forget about her?"

Lancelot also seemed to have calmed down.

Warning himself with a series of mutters, the war god languidly turned his white helmet towards the sea. It almost seemed as if he wanted to describe Kusanagi Godou as his favorite person.

"Young god-slayer, we shall part for now as there are other matters to attend to... Yes, though this Knight is logically unqualified to say this, Athena shall be left to you. Please give the great goddess a worthy and spectacular farewell."

"I don't need you to tell me. We will settle our score the next time we meet."

This was the first time Godou ever promised a second battle to a deity.

Acknowledging "Hmm" to this statement, Lancelot's form gradually rarefied. The earlier mist suddenly reappeared, brought forth by the wind.

Very soon after, the dense mist dispersed and the white knight's figure vanished.

"Sorry. There's a lot I want to tell everyone, but could you all leave for now?"

There was really no time left. Godou made his request in haste.

Even though Yuri and Liliana displayed questioning gazes, they remained silent.

Looking completely drained and exhausted, Ena nodded in complete agreement.

"Yes. Do what you wish to do. I, Erica Blandelli, am not foolish enough to make irresponsible remarks about battles between the great god-slaying Devil King and the gods."

Erica proceeded to declare in her usual glamorous voice.

"...You, aren't you unexpectedly energetic?"

Athena, who should have been lying down, had gotten up already. Her head proudly raised high, she stood with her back perfectly straight. Seeing her like that, Godou remarked.

With Erica and the girls gone, they were alone together again.

The canvas of night, the white star and dark sphere had all vanished. The midday sun was shining upon this wasteland.

"Certainly. Who dost thou believe this goddess to be? One is the queen of the sky, the earth and the underworld, as the goddess of war, thou knowest? Without fulfilling one's final wish, how could one enter eternal slumber?"

Athena answered haughtily.

Even though Godou knew she was trying to be brave, it did feel like the goddess was speaking the truth.

In order for the Divine Sword of Salvation to be swung, a large portion of her immortal life had been taken. Furthermore, she even allowed Godou and Ama no Murakumo no Tsurugi to absorb her life force and powers as the great mother earth goddess.

It would not be surprising if she collapsed at any moment. It was only natural to be in such a state.

"Thou hast done well with the sword of heaven and earth's creation. Hmph... Conversely, 'tis rather fortunate this body was pierced twice by the Divine Sword of Salvation. Thanks to that, the sword's secrets were divulged, allowing a blade to be forged in its

likeness despite its rather self-centered style. Yes, it can be said that thy blade was created by Athena's hand."

Proudly declaring her success with hubris.

As expected, Athena remained unchanged to the very end. Godou's wish to save her, if it were possible, continued to persist...

However, he could not believe he was harboring such a benevolent wish so easily.

I will adhere to my own way of doing things. However, Athena should also carry through with Athena's style.

Based on the outcome, both of them had willfully brought trouble to others and were unruly existences unable to live peacefully in an orderly world. As unruly companions, an appropriate conclusion was only proper.

"So, you should understand by now. There is no need for either of us to hold back at this point."

"Right. 'Tis about time to begin."

"Yes."

A brief exchange. It was more than enough.

Indeed, Athena was only superficially lively. Godou's body was also starting to enter the state of paralysis brought by the onset of the [Raptor]'s after effects. His legs could no longer move and the pain in his heart was getting increasingly severe.

However, he could still make it in time.

Godou looked east — to where the sun rose.

"For victory, hasten forth before me! O Immortal Sun, I beseech thee to grant radiance to the stallion. O Stallion that moveth godlike with wondrous grace, bringest forth the halo of thy master !"

Godou called forth Verethragna's third incarnation, the [White Stallion].

Fragments of the sun descended from the sky in the form of Godou's heaviest firepower. The flames that only faced great sinners who brought hardship and suffering to the people. The trump card which Godou's battered body still managed to summon.

"O Darkness! One's intimate beloved, holy sanctum bound to one's coexistence. Loyal guard of the queen's final hour of demise. Obeyest divine orders!"

Athena also summoned the shielding barrier of darkness.

The hemispherical darkness entrenched itself in midair above her.

Before the white radiance flying from the east incinerated this plot of wasteland to ashes, the darkness obstructed the advance of the scorching flames, blocking it.

Vying for domination of the skies, light and darkness fought each other, colliding together.

Godou poured the remainder of his magical power into the white flashing light — the [White Stallion]'s flames. Athena also put forth all her strength with the last of her power to sustain the darkness.

What seemed like an eternity was in actual fact a very brief conflict.

In the end, light and fire were devoured by the darkness, vanishing. Godou was the first to reach his limit. Immediately afterwards, the canopy of darkness dispersed like mist.

Godou's body was already so exhausted he could not lift a single finger. With a smack, he fell over backwards onto the ground, his face towards the sky.

At that moment, Athena pounced onto Godou's body and held her hand in a karate chop.

"...How now, Kusanagi Godou? This counteth as one's victory, yes?"

"...Well, that seems about right."

Faced with this question that was equivalent to a victory declaration, Godou responded with a slippery answer.

Athena's knife hand could be used as a deadly guillotine. All she needed to do was swing that hand, and surely Kusanagi Godou's life would be severed like a weed.

Finally with a flash, the knife hand approached Godou's neck.

Nevertheless, the hand stopped just before it reached his neck.

"Alas, it seemeth that time is up. One cannot delay parting any longer."

With clearly enough time remaining to take off his head, Athena still remarked in that manner. It felt like the great goddess had no wish to do so.

"Really? Although it was a strange relationship, I will be feeling lonely. Even now, to be honest, I'm still not too sure whether meeting you was ultimately good or bad."

"Hmph. Even though 'twas unfavorable fate that failed to correct itself, 'tis thy foolishness for being bound by destiny to this goddess in such a manner."

Without trying to conceal her suggestive words, she scolded him instead.

"Then showest thy magnanimity as the victor. One's honest advice, thou shalt take to heart. —War god Lancelot, the fellow earlier was not in a complete state. 'Tis meet to describe him as injured."

Then Athena began to caress Godou's face as he lay there, immobile.

Yet he was that strong!? Godou was terrified. It was difficult to believe, but he had no other choice.

After all, this was Athena's honest advice from her final moments. He had no choice but to believe.

"Once this goddess passeth on, the Holy Grail shall return to the outside world, and go back to the Divine Ancestor's hands. Forsooth, truly a troublesome vessel had been created."

Godou nodded successively at the goddess' words.

"Thy future path is filled with the color of deadly battles. Takest utmost care. After all, thou art the god-slayer who resideth in the same country as that man — the king who manifests at the end of eras! Yes, in that case, this is the only parting gift."

Caressing Godou's face with her hands, she tenderly gazed down upon him.

Hidden in Athena's behavior was a certain type of gentleness. A sense of wistful reluctance to part.

But it felt like it was increasing slightly—

Godou suddenly had that impression.

"Though 'tis said, the more weapons the better, thou art not ready at this juncture. But on some particular day, this might prove useful in the end. Until the time comes, simply holdest onto this."

Athena's child-like beautiful face drew near and she pressed her lips against Godou's lips.

It felt like something was carved into his mind and heart, as well as deep inside the Campione's body.

Most likely Athena's secret arts. Probably some kind of spell or she was bestowing wisdom's guidance. As for its contents, Godou could not decipher it at all.

Exactly as she had said, it was probably useless for the current Godou.

Casting this issue aside, Godou instead chose to engrave in his mind the solemn and courageous appearance that Athena maintained in the face of certain death.

"Farewell is unneeded. One day, this goddess shall return, reincarnated, to seek you for revenge. Thou shalt payest what thou

owest. Because no matter when, the only one allowed to defeat Kusanagi Godou is this goddess — Heretic Athena!"

Athena and Godou's gazes met as soon as she made her bold declaration.

The goddess was looking down upon Kusanagi Godou with a haughty expression. Then she began to smile. It was an incredibly fulfilled smile as if she had finally accomplished something.

Seeing her in that fashion, Godou felt like a chunk of his heart had been carved out, with an intriguing sense of loss.

—Ah yes, she has to leave after all.

However, were gods and god-slayers not irreconcilable foes, there might have been other appropriate ways of parting.

Hence Godou silently remarked to himself, "We'll see, when the time comes."

Even though she could not have heard it, the goddess remained courageous and dauntless, smiling even more. Then suddenly she was gone.

Her body collapsed like fine particles of sand, riding the sea breeze as they scattered.

She knew it would turn out like this, but nevertheless, for the sake of honor in her final moments, she had turned her immortal life into a weapon, thereby ending her long enduring life as Goddess Athena.

Part 6

When a [Heretic God] died in the world, what happened afterwards?

Gods were indestructible. Even if life and body were lost, their own existence would continue to persist.

First of all, there was the so-called soul. Without carrying any ectoplasm, it brought the "divinity" itself to the "Boundary of Life and Immortality." From there it then reached the "Domain of Immortality."

The Domain of Immortality — in other words, the myths themselves.

Losing their body and their soul after death, gods could only continue existing in the myths.

And then, through some chance occurrence, they might become a [Heretic God] once more.

At that time, the divinity will be released from the Domain of Immortality, forming great ectoplasm — transforming into a divine spirit.

Proceeding to obtain a material body on earth, thereby manifesting. What is known as the divinity, for example, could be said to be something that amalgamates all myths concerning that particular deity.

...This was the truth of the world that Athena knew.

Having reached death in the Far East, she lost her material body .

Persisting as a divine spirit for now, her consciousness was retained. But very soon, even this would disappear as well.

She wished to return to the world again before that god-slayer dies a pitiful death.

This could only be entrusted to the gears of destiny.

In the process of disappearing, Athena's thoughts were shaken. Currently, her divine spirit was no longer above ground but was sinking towards the abyssal depths of the earth. She saw golden light ahead of her.

One seeth. So that is the Holy Grail's true form—

This thought only lasted an instant. Immediately, she felt completely indifferent.

Her consciousness, memories and personality as Athena were slowly dissipating.

Just as Athena passed on, Godou's paralysis finally ended.

Erica, along with Yuri and Liliana, as well as Seishuuin Ena had returned to this desolate battlefield.

"Your Majesty, could you be feeling lonesome?"

"No, nothing like that. She seems to have finished everything she wanted to do, and thanks to everyone's help I was also able to do everything I wanted."

Ena's question seemed to be asking on behalf of all the girls how Athena's passing away should be treated.

Godou answered with forthrightness. The goddess had displayed a smile like that. In that case, there was no need to hold anything back.

He originally expected indifferent voices and facial expressions, but the girls' reactions were unbelievable.

Ena was smiling as if comforting him, with an expression that seemed to relieve his exhaustion.

Liliana was silent but her eyes glimmered with empathy. Yuri smiled gently as if displaying all encompassing acceptance.

Then Erica voiced the final conclusions.

"Right. Godou had responded with battle spirit to Athena who sought life and death in accordance to her style. Some may wish to make impertinent criticisms, but at least I won't be the one to do it. "

The female knight's philosophy could never acknowledge Godou's decision as wise.

Perhaps everyone had already noticed.

Due to the passing away of the enemy bound to him by fate, Kusanagi Godou felt an intriguing sense of loss— Apparently, he was making everyone else worry.

Godou believed the girls were his very good companions, and felt obliged to express his thanks to them.

He was definitely at fault with his controversial choice of action. Godou bowed his head towards Liliana and Yuri.

"I am sorry for causing trouble for you two in particular. It's my fault. In the end, using a gambling kind of method to release the petrification... When clearly there was a safer alternative. I am in the wrong for acting like that."

"Indeed. But very unfortunately, I am the one who is your knight. No matter how cruel or merciless a Devil King Kusanagi Godou may be, this life swears eternal loyal allegiance."

Despite Liliana's voicing of her grievances, she bore lenient eyes of full acceptance.

"In addition, no matter how the process went, being saved by you from the crisis is also the truth. In that case, our debts cancel out."

"Oh I see. Sorry anyway."

Prompted by Liliana's smile, Godou smiled wryly in turn.

Godou knew that she was proposing this kind of logic to lessen his guilt. What gratifying words.

"I just want to express my gratitude to Godou-san, without any intention of reproach. Also..."

As Yuri started speaking cautiously, Godou began to fear.

He did not expect to be let off so easily, but he was overjoyed at her leniency.

But what was with that "also"? She seemed to have more to add.

"Whether it is destruction of locations or bringing trouble to others, please do not hesitate in speaking out. As long as it concerns Godou-san, let it be as promised previously. No matter where you need to go for penance, I will accompany you. You can tell me any time."

"In Kaoru-san's words, it's all been precalculated anyway."

"Well, even though I also believe Sayanomiya Kaoru's methods of concealing the truth should be flawless, in the event that penance needs to be paid, not only Mariya Yuri, I too, shall go along."

"That's right. If that's the case, Ena will go too. It's also a kind of social event."

"...Everyone, I am really grateful."

Yuri's lenient words seemed like they came from a virtuous wife, taking care of a delinquent husband. Together with Liliana and Ena who expressed support, seeing the girls cooperate and get along was really a comforting sight.

Everything deserved to be counted as good fortune. However, the fact that Godou was inexplicably counting his blessings was kept secret.

"By the way, you ended up coming back immediately."

"Yes. I managed to make it before the final climax ended. This is evidence of our excellent fortune, whether you or me. Of course, your fortune was already apparent from the fact that I, Erica Blandelli, am your companion."

As Godou struck up conversation with her, Erica replied in her usual tone.

Her absence approached two weeks. Even so, Godou felt an incredible sense of satisfaction just simply joking around with each other like that. Likewise for Erica, she giggled and began to smile.

Just a simple exchange like that.

Godou did not have a topic of conversation to further liven up the mood, nor did he feel the need to hug each other in joy from being reunited.

However, he felt that this was sufficient. That was the nature of his relationship with Erica.

"...Eh? Amakasu-san, what happened?"

Everyone's gaze was drawn as Ena suddenly pointed somewhere.

It was the History Compilation Committee's special agent who always wore a sloppy suit. In actual fact, he was Japan's top ninja. As well as being a practitioner of onmyoudou.[42] That was what Godou had previously heard from the two Hime-Miko.

This very Amakasu Touma was now approaching them with unsteady footsteps.

His body seemed like it had received an intense electrical shock, for even the act of walking normally was difficult.

"What happened, Amakasu-san!?"

Godou dragged his exhausted body and ran over to him.

"M-My apologies, Kusanagi-san... That, that thing was robbed... "

"That thing... Could it be the Heavenly Reverse Halberd!?"

Amakasu nodded weakly to confirm this natural conclusion.

Could it be Guinevere's group? Pretending to retreat, when actually they were aiming for Amakasu?

But after learning the details, Godou knew this speculation was wrong. When he heard the culprit's name and origins, Godou felt surprise from the core of his being.

"That person came to Japan, eh... How truly unexpected."

Erica murmured in shock.

It was a state of affairs that even exceeded the expectations of the brilliant [Diavolo Rosso].

Epilogue

Alexandre Gascoigne was a very busy man.

To this description, the woman who was his enemy, once added most redundantly, "To be precise, his desire for work creates never-ending tasks for himself." In any case, he was very busy.

After all, he had a very ostentatious title.

The god-slaying Devil King Campione, commander-in-chief of the secret association, [Royal Arsenal]!

Even though it was not a position he wished for, somehow it naturally developed to this state.

A man above all peoples was obliged to display work ethic and behavior in accordance to his stature. Such was his aesthetic ideal.

Almost twelve years had passed since Alec had become a Campione.

During this time, he vigorously conducted his activities with such an intent.

Thanks to that, the name of Black Prince Alec was widely known as a Devil King of the new age.

As a side note, he was nicknamed "Prince" because of his obvious youth in comparison to Devil Kings of olden days like Marquis Voban.

Nevertheless, even Alec would take roughly one vacation a year .

Wherever his destination, somehow he was always met with troublesome conflicts.

Embroiled into the Divine Ancestor's conspiracies. Encountering [Heretic Gods]. Saving ordinary citizens who were about to be wiped out by profound and magical secret arts. Stealing ancient treasures whose existences he learned of by chance. Hassled by headache-inducing female acquaintances.

Thinking back again, he had never had a peaceful relaxing vacation...

"Hence, I will change my way of thinking instead."

During mid autumn, that was what Alec said to his trusted subordinate.

As a side note, European vacations were usually taken during the summer. But due to all sorts of busy work and matters, his vacation had been pushed back to November.

"Since troublesome things will happen anyway, I might as well go directly to where trouble is brewing. I will make a brief visit to Japan."

"Oh. If I remember correctly, that is the place in the far east where you went about a month ago."

The other participant of the conversation was Alec's bodyguard, Sir Iceman.

A legendary knight without any flaws (aerophobia aside), having passed the age of thirty, his solemn face felt increasingly seasoned as time went by.

"Yeah. There has been reports of Guinevere's secret activities. I think this is a good chance to investigate that woman's plans. I'll rely on you to keep watch here."

"...Alec. I've held this idea from a very long time ago."

This was the scene when Alec entrusted remaining matters to his reliable subordinate and close friend.

However, Sir Iceman shook his head as if troubled by a dilemma, and said:

"The reason why you keep running into trouble lies here. Smothering the embers of disaster with great effort each time, only to quickly encounter another one, and even deliberately starting fires of your own, grumbling to yourself as you try to put them out ... That personality of yours is precisely the number one culprit."

"Wait a minute. Putting that aside, hasn't a certain person been causing many troublesome incidents?!"

"In that case, you really should reflect on your choice of friends. I can see no reason in maintaining ties of friendship all this time with people who keep running into trouble."

Sir Iceman objected with a disappointed face as he shrugged sardonically.

That Princess and Divine Ancestor, as well as that other group of shady characters were not his friends. Alec wanted to shout that out, but for the sake of his authority and dignity, he refrained.

Anyway, he was currently on vacation.

In order to avoid alerting those involved in the Japanese world of magic, he needed to take precautions during entry. Using a passport with a fake name, he traveled like "a king in disguise."

...With regards to the outcome, this vacation turned out to be rather peaceful.

Divine Ancestor Guinevere, Lancelot who had become a [Heretic God], as well as the commotion caused by Goddess Athena , none of them required Alec to take action.

Japan's Campione, Kusanagi Godou, had undertaken everything upon himself.

During this time, Alec was essentially observing as a bystander.

"Looks like Guinevere still hasn't given up on 'Arthur.'"

Having discovered the Witch Queen's plot, he quietly muttered to himself.

The king who manifests at the end of eras. The war god whose origins lay in fantastic heroic legends. Due to his research and

adventures for the past few years, Alec's investigation about him had reached new depths.

"Were you hindered just as you were about to revive him successfully?"

The opinionated Guinevere's vision was actually quite narrow. Even though Alec did not think she was able to solve the mystery easily, he still had to take precautions...

At the same time, he did not forget his personal interests.

While hanging around Tokyo, he investigated the inner workings of the History Compilation Committee.

Even though he had said he wanted a relaxing sightseeing tour of Japan... And tentatively still considering a tour like that, in the end, he prioritized intelligence gathering. This was his workaholism at work — he would feel anxious whenever there was no work or research to be done.

"As always, you're still leading a private life fatally lacking in delight, glamor, or healing presences. Your future worries me so. Without any family or lover to accompany your days, wouldn't your life end in lonesome solitude?"

He was reminded of the pitying words offered by that long-time female acquaintance who was definitely not his friend. In any case, Alec was still enjoying his stay in Japan.

Furthermore, he even became a villain along the way.

The Heavenly Reverse Halberd that Guinevere had wanted to obtain, was a rather interesting divine artifact.

"Maybe call it... Earning some tips, not bad at all."

Quietly muttering to himself, he tried out a little trick.

His first authority of divine speed. It not only allowed him to run as fast as the wind, but even gave him the ability to turn into lightning and take flight.

In actual fact, there were all sorts of variations in application.

Such as leaving virtual afterimages like ninjas of legend, giving other people divine speed apart from himself, or turning himself into lightning for an instant to unleash electrical attacks.

Amongst these various abilities, he could also virtually erase his complete presence, allowing him to undertake secret activities with divine speed.

As long as he unleashed divine speed fully, he became as fast as lightning.

However, objects moving at super high speed will cause others to notice something was amiss. It was a power not particularly suited to staying hidden.

Using divine speed to move undetected—

If that could be done, then he could achieve the feat of being active around wild beasts without their noticing.

Alec was able to control divine speed as easily as his own arms and legs... Well, to do so he needed to remove all hindering burdens. Even a coat could not be worn because any extra force exerted would cause detectable movements. So physical tasks also had to be avoided. But what about something on the level of delivering a piece of paper?

Alec took off his winter coat and began using divine speed in light clothing.

He then approached Kusanagi Godou while he was eating and left the note there.

Eavesdropping on their subsequent reactions and conversations about the entire matter, Alec successfully confirmed the identity of the man carrying the Heavenly Reverse Halberd.

A wizard and special agent who seemed kind of unmotivated. But quite competent indeed. On that night, Guinevere had been pursuing this man, trying to snatch away the Heavenly Reverse Halberd.

The man had skillfully employed concealment spells, successfully shaking the witch off his trail.

Even Alec had lost him at one point. It seemed like he was some kind of ninja authority.

However, after Lancelot's battle with Athena and Kusanagi Godou had began, Alec found the man near the battlefield.

Faced with such a tense situation, even that man showed an opening. That made everything that followed rather simple.

Turning into lightning, Alec silently stole his way to the man's back and made light contact. As the man collapsed, convulsing from the electrical shock, Alec casually retrieved the Heavenly Reverse Halberd from his suit.

At the time, the ninja showed a surprised expression as he remained conscious.

Killing him to silence a witness... Was the type of unwise decision that Alec did not intend to take. He simply shrugged and left.

England's black gentleman and Japan's Kusanagi Godou.

With that, an intriguing connection of destiny had been established between the two.

Afterword

"Stop talking nonsense."

This line of dialogue has occurred many times in the main story.

While writing this series, I also felt compelled to say the exact line out loud many times. Naturally, they were all aimed at our protagonist. By the way.

"As soon as that line was said..."

Regardless, I still want to announce, despite having a guy like that as the protagonist, this series is finally approaching double digits in the number of volumes.

This is all thanks to everyone's support, so let me express my deepest gratitude.

So, this time the long absent goddess-sama makes another appearance.

Written as mortal enemy but read as "friend."

This youth's revolutionary proposition will always be a proposition met by all protagonists. This idea was thought up a long time ago. Then in that case, the one proposed to most likely had to be her.

No matter what, if he and she could act out this kind of " romantic comedy" at "some school or living under the same roof,"

the characters and plot will need to be designed to be more distinctive. If their paths were to cross once again, I think that would be the feeling given off.

To this date, the story has mixed into it events such as goddesses reincarnating into witches, or dormant deities. Oh my, how will things progress from here?

Also, there is Tokunaga Asuka-san who first appeared in the previous volume. But actually, a little story about her part-time work was already published on the Super Dash Bunko official website's *Campione!* specials.

Next volume will have our protagonist matching up against that Englishman.

Amongst the various personalities of sporty, emotional right brain dominant, barbaric, carnivorous, casual carelessness of the great Devil Kings, only that one guy is so-called cultured, rational, sensitive and civilized, herbivore.

These kinds of exotic character traits.

How will this incomprehensible combination develop? By the way, it needs no mentioning, but of course our protagonist belongs in the first group.

His self declarations are wrong. When the time comes, let us meet again with the next volume.

Oh by the way, my long time acquaintance, Itou Hiro, author of the well-received "アー", has his new work "Bara x Yuri " published by Super Dash Bunko on the same day as this volume of *Campione!* .

It's really amusing. If possible, I hope everyone can check it out.

I think everyone will be satisfied.

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ **Saitenguu**(西): fictional shrine, name literally means " Western Heavenly Temple."
2. ↑ **Tsuba-zeriai**: The situation where the distance between two opponents are at their closest, with both players holding their shinai tilted and the tsuba (sword guard) locked against each other, attacking each other's grip and destroying each other's posture.
3. ↑ **Natale**: Italian for Christmas.
4. ↑ **Festa**: Italian for holiday, feast day, festival, etc.
5. ↑ **Takoyaki**: a ball-shaped Japanese snack made of batter and diced octopus. [1]
6. ↑ **Okonomiyaki**: a Japanese savory fried pancake that contains a variety of ingredients.[2]
7. ↑ **Castella**: a popular Japanese sponge cake.[3]
8. ↑ **Konto**(コ): borrowed from the French word *conte*, a traditional Japanese style of comedic performance performed by telling stories.[4]
9. ↑ **Hiroshimayaki**: Okonomiyaki (fried pancakes) cooked Hiroshima style.[5]
10. ↑ **Riajuu**: otaku term for people who appear to lead successful and fulfilling lives in the real world.
11. ↑ **Pu-erh tea**(普): a variety of post-fermented tea produced in Yunnan province of China.[6]
12. ↑ **Gelato**: Italian ice cream made using milk, cream, sugars and flavorings such as fresh fruit or nut purees.[7]
13. ↑ **Yamato Takeru**: a legendary prince of the Yamato Dynasty ; his father Emperor Keiko feared his brutal temperament and sent him on numerous campaigns, hoping for his death.

But his aunt, a miko of Amaterasu (Japanese sun god), lent him the Kusanagi Sword (also named Ama no Murakumo) to assist him; nevertheless, he died tragically of an illness after blaspheming one of the local gods.[8]

14. ↑ **Kojiki**(古): dating from the early 8th century, the "Record of Ancient Matters" is the oldest surviving chronicle in Japan and is a collection of myths concerning the origin of the four home islands of Japan.[9]
15. ↑ **Heavenly Reverse Halberd**(天): a reference to the Amenonuhoko ("heavenly jeweled spear") which is the naginata in Japanese mythology used to raise the primordial land-mass from the sea.[10]
16. ↑ **Izanagi**: a male deity who bore many of the islands, deities and forefathers of Japan with his sister Izanami.[11]
17. ↑ **Izanami**: a goddess of creation and death, the former wife of Izanagi.[12]
18. ↑ **Yamato**(倭): ancient name for Japan.
19. ↑ **Koiguchi wo kiru**(鯉): literally means "cutting the carp's mouth," the act of loosening a sword from its scabbard.[13]
20. ↑ **Kabuki**: classical Japanese dance-drama, known for stylized drama and elaborate makeup. Kabuki performed by actresses was deemed too erotic and banned in 1629. Young boys were used next, but were also banned because they too were eligible for prostitution. Thus started the modern all-male kabuki performed by adults where female roles were taken by cross-dressing males. Emphasis in performance was shifted from dance to drama. However, these male actors too, were available for prostitution to both male and female customers. [14]

21. ↑ **Issouku-ittou no ma**(一): literally the distance of "one step and one cut," the most basic and ultimate distance in kendo. It implies that taking a further step will allow you to cut your opponent. Also known as the point of "dead or alive," it means either you or your opponent will be dead or alive beyond that point.
22. ↑ **Ahura Mazda**: a divinity of the Old Iranian religion that was worshiped as the highest deity by Zoroastrianism. Ahura Mazda is the lord of light and wisdom, omniscient but not omnipotent.[15]
23. ↑ **Nekodamashi**(猫): an unconventional sumo wrestling technique when a wrestler claps his hands in front of the opponent's face at the start of the bout, causing the opponent to blink and allowing the instigator to gain an advantage. The technique is a gamble, for miscarriage leaves the wrestler open to attack.[16]
24. ↑ **Seiza**(正): traditional formal Japanese sitting posture.[17]
25. ↑ **Concentration**: a card game where the object is to find pairs from overturned cards on the table.[18]
26. ↑ **Sevens**: a card game where players have to form sequences going up or down in suit from the sevens.[19]
27. ↑ **Juunihitoe**(十): literally "twelve-layer robe," the juunihitoe is an extremely elegant and highly complex kimono that was worn only by court-ladies in Japan.[20]
28. ↑ **One-Seg**: a mobile terrestrial digital audio/visual broadcasting service in Japan, Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Peru.[21]
29. ↑ **Mephistopheles**: a demon featured in the Faust legend and subsequently used as a stock version of the devil.[22]

30. ↑ **Jujutsu**(柔): a type of Japanese martial arts and close combat for defeating armed and armored opponents with nothing but bare hands or a short weapon.[23]
31. ↑ **Shuriken**(手): literally "sword in hand," a traditional Japanese concealed weapon used for throwing, stabbing or slashing.[24]
32. ↑ **Jutte**(十): literally "ten-hands," a specialized Japanese non-bladed weapon.[25]
33. ↑ **Anki**(暗): a class of hidden weapons used for throwing or stabbing, went into decline with the advent of firearms.
34. ↑ **Scáthach**: deity appearing in Irish mythology, legendary Scottish warrior woman who trained the hero Cú Chulainn.[26]
35. ↑ Ezekiel 3:9
36. ↑ Joshua 6:13
37. ↑ Joshua 6:15-16
38. ↑ Joshua 6:21
39. ↑ Joshua 6:26
40. ↑ 2 Samuel 1:27
41. ↑ 2 Samuel 1:22
42. ↑ **Onmyoudou**(陰): literally "the way of the Yin and the Yang", mixing science and occult, a traditional Japanese philosophy based on Chinese concepts of the Five Elements and the Yin-Yang duality.[27]